

JQ Magazine: Tohoku Projects—The TOMODACHI Initiative

BY MAGAZINE – JANUARY 3, 2014

POSTED IN: MAGAZINE, NEWS

By Sheila Burt (Toyama-ken, 2010-12) for JQ magazine. As part of an occasional series, Sheila is profiling individuals who are or were in some way involved with rebuilding efforts in the Tohoku region. Her first post was on the writing project 3,000 Letters to Japan. After JET, Burt spent an additional year in Japan working at a private school and translation company. She recently returned to the Chicago area. Read more of her reporting at her blog, Stories from the Inaka.

Having been posted in Tokyo during the disastrous March 11 earthquake and tsunami of 2011, diplomat Suzanne Basalla saw firsthand how quickly Japan changed in a matter of seconds.

As senior advisor to former Ambassador John V. Roos in the Embassy of the United States in Tokyo, Basalla had been living in Japan since March 2010, advising Roos on several economic and foreign policy matters. A few months after 3/11, Basalla visited Tohoku and started thinking of ways to encourage redevelopment in the stricken area, “trying to do what we [could] to create hope and support,” she recalled. Although her post with the embassy ended in March 2012, she realized she wasn’t ready to go back to the Pentagon.

Instead, Basalla and a team of others pooled their efforts to create the TOMODACHI Initiative, a public-private partnership established in the wake of 3/11 with the U.S.-Japan Council in Washington. TOMODACHI helps coordinate educational, business and cultural exchange programs for Japanese youth, particularly students in Tohoku, where development opportunities are still few and far between. Presenting at a Japan American Society of Chicago event last October, Basalla referred to TOMODACHI as “an incredibly important initiative...with a path-breaking paradigm.”

“Part of leadership is getting to know yourself,” said Basalla, who now serves as executive vice president of the U.S.-Japan Council. “TOMODACHI’s initiative is to inspire and empower young Japanese and Americans by giving them experience, skills and confidence to achieve their dreams and contribute to a better world.”

TOMODACHI’s initiatives are three-fold: Education Programs (25%); cultural programs (30%); and entrepreneurship and leadership programs (45%). All of these programs target students and young adults, and although the core focus is students in the Tohoku region, Basalla said TOMODACHI will also expand to other parts of Japan. So far, Basalla noted, about 10,400 people have participated in TOMODACHI events, including sports camps and business development programs. She noted that “the investment in youth exchange has come at a pivotal moment.” Many of TOMODACHI’s programs and fellowships are the result of targeting donations from major Japanese corporations, including SoftBank, Uniqlo and Toyota Motor Corp.

In her presentation, Basalla noted the story of Haruna Shiraiwa, a high school student who lived about 500 meters from the coastline near the nuclear disaster zone in Fukushima. Through TOMODACHI, Shiraiwa participated in a youth exchange program at UC Berkeley, learning leadership skills not taught in the Japanese public schools. After the program, she founded TOMOTRA (Tomodachi Travel Agency), which gives tours of the stricken area to interested tourists in order to promote the hard-hit tourism industry in the area.

“I learned through my TOMODACHI experience the importance of trying without fearing failure,” she wrote of her experience on the initiative’s homepage.

“It is okay to fail because you can learn from the experience.”

To learn more about the TOMODACHI Initiative or to get involved, visit <http://usjapantomodachi.org>. For upcoming Japan America Society of Chicago events, visit www.jaschicago.org/events/calendar.



Suzanne Basalla, left, presents *The TOMODACHI Generation: Investing in the NEXT Generation of U.S – Japan Relations*, Chicago, Oct. 11, 2013. (Sheila Burt)

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