

Japanese students visit Del Norte

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Del Norte High School students pose with new friends during a visit last year to Takata High School in Japan.

Submitted

Schools began exchange after boat from Takata washed up in Crescent City

Nearly a year after local students visited Takata High School in Japan, the teens they met there will get a taste of what life is like in Del Norte County.

Fourteen high school students and four adults from Rikuzentakata, Japan, will land in San Francisco and be driven to Crescent City on Sunday. The Japanese students will be given a tour of Del Norte High School and be introduced to their American peers. They will take a handful of classes, be fed a school lunch and visit some of Del Norte's attractions, including Stout Grove and Trees of Mystery.

During the introduction assembly on Monday, both sets of students will receive certificates from Del Norte's newly-elected state senator, Mike McGuire. Japan's vice consul for economic affairs will also pay Del Norte High a visit.

While here, Takata High students will be introduced to the Del Norte County Unified School District Board of Trustees as well as to the Yurok Tribe in Klamath.

"There's so many similarities: We're a small coastal town up in the north, which is what Rikuzentakata is. They've got fisheries; they've got some timber. There are just a lot of similarities," said Del Norte County Sheriff Cmdr. Bill Steven.

"We've had our tsunami as well as other issues since then."

Events leading to the cultural exchange between the two schools started when a 20-foot fishing boat was sucked into sea during the March 2011 tsunami and washed ashore in Crescent City about two years later. Lori Dengler, a Humboldt State University geology professor and tsunami expert, traced the boat's origin to Takata High School.

A group of students from Del Norte High School, including Steven's son John, cleaned up the vessel and worked on returning it to Rikuzentakata, which suffered nearly 2,000 fatalities due to the tsunami. Last February, six Del Norte High School students visited Japan, met Takata's student body, the governor of the Iwate Prefecture and Caroline Kennedy, the U.S. Ambassador to Japan.

The Del Norte delegation's trip was primarily funded by the TOMODACHI Initiative, a public-private partnership inspired by the support and spirit of friendship between the U.S. and Japan following the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Shortly after returning to Del Norte County, Coleen Parker, who was DNHS's principal at the time, said she received a phone call from the Japan Foundation, the country's largest foundation, which "wanted to know how they could assist us in developing this sister school relationship." Parker contacted Amya Miller, Rikuzentakata's public relations representative, and they began planning the Takata High School delegation's trip to Del Norte.

"The purpose beyond them getting to meet us and learn about us is they're going to develop the nuts and bolts of their relationship," Parker said, referring to the potential sister school relationship between Del Norte and

Takata.

Both Del Norte and Japanese students will meet on Thursday to draft out what their relationship will look like, Parker said.

The number of students interested in maintaining a sister school relationship with Takata High has also grown from the core group of six that helped clean the boat. Parker worked with Alison Eckart, advisor of the school's student senate, who put the word out to their peers.

"I had a room full of 35–40 students who showed up," Parker said. "Basically it's going to be a club. I don't think it's realistic to expect an annual trip back and forth, but every three to four years maybe a handful of students can go back and forth."

Each year students on both sides of the Pacific will have activities they can do together via Facebook and the internet, Parker said. Some of those activities can include slide shows of how both sets of students celebrate holidays like Valentine's Day.

"It's going to be very interesting to see what the kids come up with," she said. "I'm excited to see how this plays out."

The adults in the group will also be asked to give a presentation to local emergency personnel on the 2011 tsunami's aftermath and efforts to rebuild. This meeting will take place at 2 p.m. Thursday at the Crescent Fire Protection District, 255 W. Washington Blvd. in Crescent City.

The students leave for San Francisco at 6 a.m. Jan. 10. They will see the Golden Gate Bridge, go shopping at Pier 39 and possibly visit with Japan's General Consul Masato Watanabe.

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