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Building the bonds of friendship



Tall grass grows over the foundations of thousands of homes flattened by the tsunami of 2011 in Natori City, Japan. Below, Dakota Birkenheier, second from left, and fellow exchange students. PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAKOTA BIRKENHEIER

Youth-exchange program encourages new depth of understanding

DAKOTA BIRKENHEIER
Special to 24hrs

In April 2012 the Japanese government launched a youth-exchange program called the Kizuna (Bonds of Friendship) in order to share their stories of environmental recovery since the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

Under this project, more than 10,000 youths from 41 countries have an opportunity to witness Japan's revival efforts and to build lasting bonds of friendship.

Late last September, I was informed that my school, Malvern Collegiate Institute in the Beach, had been selected as one of four schools in Canada to partake in the Japanese funded project.

In my school there were spots for 20 people to attend and the competition was stiff as over 100 people showed interest in going. I was fortunate to be selected after a rigorous process that included a written essay and letters of recommendation.

Before departure time, we attended multiple presentations by members of the Japanese Consulate and fellow group members. We

had lessons on Japanese history, language and culture and were given opportunities to learn Japanese at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in downtown Toronto.

A highlight of the preparation was a dinner reception at the Japanese Consul's private residence in Toronto, where students mingled with Japanese dignitaries, local politicians and media.

Finally, March 1 came and we drove to Pearson Airport and departed for Tokyo. Wide-eyed we landed

in Tokyo and after only one night, we took the world famous Bullet Train to Sendai City in the northern part of Japan. From there we took buses to nearby areas that were affected by the tsunami.

One area that we visited was called Natori City and in this one area alone nine hundred and eleven people lost their lives and many are still missing. The view was of tall grass growing over the

foundations of thousands of homes that were flattened by a 5-metre wave. Near the waters edge excavators removed piles of debris from where homes once stood. These wood piles were then burned at an incinerator on the coast. The bus ride back to the hotel that night was a solemn one.

We also visited a local library — rebuilt with the help of money donated by the Canadian government. The library — bright and beautifully furnished — is used widely by the community who view it

as a positive sign of re-growth. They could not thank us enough for what

Canadians had donated after such a tragedy. A few days later we found ourselves in a small fishing village in the Oku-Matsushima area on Miyato Island. This area had no casualties but most of the hotels and homes that were close to the water were swept away.

Here we experienced the culture of a traditional

Japanese village on the coast. We learned how to harvest and process seaweed and bring in traps filled with seafood.

Getting to know the locals and hearing their stories touched us all deeply. Despite what happened to their village, they had stayed strong and carried on after the destruction.

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Matsushima and headed back to Sendai City.

We spent our last two days experiencing Japanese home life — staying with families in an area south of Tokyo called Atsugi.

After a tearful departure from the families, we left Japan to come home.

Every person who went on the trip had the opportunity to host a student from Japan who was touring Canada. We had the students tour our

school and gave them a real taste of Canadian culture as we visited the Kortright Centre, the Ontario Legislature, ROM and had tours of downtown Toronto.

After three days of hosting we said goodbye. Our adventure was over, but we have memories that will last for a lifetime and Kizuna (bonds) that will last forever.

— DAKOTA BIRKENHEIER, 17, IS A GRADE 11 STUDENT AT MALVERN COLLEGIATE INSTITUTE