

MESSAGE FROM CONSUL-GENERAL SASAYAMA TAKUYA

August 2023

Various events that had been canceled or scaled back during the pandemic have mostly returned to normal this summer. From the many vibrant events and gatherings which occurred this month, I would like to tell you about three in particular.

1. JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme) Departure from Toronto

I wrote about the JET Programme once back in June 2021. This August, more than 50 JET participants – the same number as prior to the pandemic – departed for Japan from Toronto with a great deal of enthusiasm. They will literally be posted all over Japan, from Hokkaido through Kyushu to Okinawa.

On Aug. 4, the day before their departure, JETs from across Ontario gathered in Toronto and attended a final briefing session on last-minute precautions and other pertinent information at our Consulate-General, giving them also an opportunity to meet each other in person. Everyone was clearly listening intently to the briefing. Some of them had already traveled or stayed in Japan, while for others this would be their first exposure to the country.

Most JETs work as Assistant Language Teachers supporting English language education in public schools. Some, however, are dispatched to regional governments as Coordinators for International Relations (CIR). Toronto has a sister city relationship with Sagamihara, and one of our participants will be posted there as a CIR. I sincerely hope this will result in strengthening the friendship enjoyed by the two cities.

Some of this year's participants told me their fathers had also gone on JET. It made me realize just how long the program has been around and how it now spans across generations.

What experiences will this year's participants have? I sincerely look forward to hearing of their successes.



2. Keio University Ice Hockey Team's Hockey Training Camp in Toronto

The Keio University Ice Hockey Team, considered to be among the pioneers of Japanese hockey, celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. As you well know, hockey is tremendously popular in Canada and is often considered to be the country's national sport. Keio University has exchanged a memorandum of understanding with the University of Toronto and holds a hockey training camp here once every three years. The first time was in 2017, and it was unfortunately suspended after that because of the pandemic. The second camp was finally held this year around mid-August. A Keio University team of more than 30 players and coaches held a training camp in the Toronto suburb of Scarborough. The camp will include a practice match with the U of T.

What I wanted very much to tell you here is that it was Mr. Mel Wakabayashi, a legendary Japanese Canadian hockey player, who first created the opportunity for this exchange between Keio University and the University of Toronto. Mr. Wakabayashi was born in a Japanese Canadian internment camp during the Second World War. After the war, unable to return to their home in British Columbia, his family spent time in Chatham, Ontario. He emerged as a promising hockey player despite his small stature, and played in American college leagues and was once even chosen as Player of the Year. He subsequently traveled to Japan and achieved successes in the Seibu Railway's hockey club and the Kokudo Keikaku (National Land Planning) hockey club. He was a driving force in popularizing hockey in Japan.

The start of his life was an unfortunately typical example of a Japanese Canadian family suffering hardship during their wartime internment, so his career after the war was all the more remarkable. He did not speak Japanese when he first moved to Japan, and the thinking behind Japanese hockey differed greatly from how the game

was played in Canada, resulting him having to confront many challenges. He also coached the Japanese hockey team at the 1980 Winter Olympics at Lake Placid. When Keio University expressed a desire to strengthen its hockey club, he introduced them to the University of Toronto.

Mr. Wakabayashi passed away in Tokyo in July this year. In August, an article celebrating his life was published in the Globe and Mail, just as Keio University's hockey team was holding its training camp here. I would like to pay my respects to our predecessors who established such fruitful ties between Japan and Canada and sincerely hope that such exchanges will continue.



3. Japan Festival Canada and the Visit to Toronto by Sumo Stablemaster Miyagino (formerly the Yokozuna Champion Hakuho)

Japan Festival Canada was held again in Mississauga again this year on Aug. 19 and 20. It has grown to become one of the major festivals in North America.

I attended the Opening Ceremony on the first day, alongside Mississauga city councillors, federal cabinet ministers and other dignitaries advocating for stronger Japan-Ontario relations and the sister-city relations between Mississauga and Kariya in Japan's Aichi Prefecture.

This year, a “dream project” which had been put on hold during the pandemic, was finally realized. Sumo’s famed Stablemaster Miyagino (formerly the Yokozuna Champion Hakuho) appeared at the Festival as a special guest from Japan. The former Yokozuna spoke on his first meeting with sumo to an excited crowd. It turns out he entered the world of sumo because of a visit to his native Mongolia by a member of the Japan Sumo Association. Due to this personal experience, he remains very interested in the international exchange of sumo wrestling.

Many Japanese businesses established booths during the Festival. The program featured performances of drums and Yosakoi dancing in addition to food. The eventful two days truly contributed to the deepening of Japan-Canada relations.

