

On behalf of the 23 Centennial students involved in the Kakehashi project, the UGDSB, and my colleague and fellow chaperone, Cory Lipovschek, I want to thank the Government of Japan, the Japanese consulate in Toronto, the National Federation of UNESCO Associations of Japan and the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada for sponsoring the Youth Exchange Program between Canada and Japan which allowed us to take part in this initiative.

The purpose of the program is to encourage greater understanding between the youth of Japan and Canada and to foster long-term and ongoing interest in one another by providing first hand experiences with the culture of the other.

From September 18th – 28th, our Canadian Centennial students were immersed in the essence of Japanese culturewe saw everything the brochure boasts: temples in gold, temples in simplicity, shrines in tranquility and gardens in refinement.

Our travels took us - from the capital city of Tokyo (with a population equal to that of our entire country) where we rode the “bullet train”; to the Chiyoda Orchards where we experienced the harvest season by collecting and eating (and eating) kyoho grapes; to the mountainous area of Nikko via 48 hair pin turns up an incredibly windy road to visit a traditional Japanese Inn.

We learned about karate, the heritage of railways in Japan and abroad, the effects of the March 2011 earthquake (referred to as 311), industrial robots, and how technology is used in the field of agriculture, the Asahi Kasei Chemical Corporation which is the pioneer and world leader in modern plastics manufacturing.

We saw Fuji San, the Toshogu Shrine, a Pagoda built with anti-earthquake shock absorbing technology, and on every corner – convenience stores and vending machines!

We experienced relaxing in hot springs, eating dinner dressed in a Yukata, sleeping on a tatami mat, wearing slippers in school, cleaning the school after a day of instruction, eating with chopsticks, having lunch in a bento box, incredible cuisine, and seine fishing.

We made traditional Japanese bamboo sandals – regardless of the size of our feet – which ranged from size 5 to 15. Needless to say, it took some students longer than others to make their sandals!

In addition to making sandals, we made “friends”. We each experienced a distinct home-stay, through which we discovered more about ourselves as Canadians, ambassadors for our school, Guelph and Canada. We also discovered the spirit of Japan through its people who are respectful, kind, generous, patient, disciplined and proud of their heritage. Each of us has our own story to tell about what happened on the weekend with our host families. Whatever we did, the end result, after spending an extra day going to school with our new friends, was - smiling, hugging, some crying, sharing of email addresses and promises to keep in touch until we meet again in March.

Our memories will last a lifetime and I am convinced that this trip has provided the building blocks for the ‘bridge for tomorrow’. We all have our own ideas about next travels to Japan. We are currently planning what to do with our partner school students when they visit Canada and, on our final 36 hour Saturday, we shared what we think of as “our” Japan.

The answers were wonderful, insightful, creative and thoughtful. I would like to conclude with Emily’s eloquent account of “her” Japan – it says it all:

My Japan is a contradiction unto itself

My Japan is: a juxtaposition of the bustling urban streets of Tokyo and the isolated mountainside of Nikko

My Japan is: the *scorching* hot springs and the *cold* Pacific Ocean

My Japan is: strangers who became family and family who became a strange memory

My Japan is geographically small, yet incredibly vast

My Japan was so very far from home yet became one all the same.