Disaster-affected children experience CFAY homestay

Story and photo by Jeffrey C. Doepp, CFAY Public Affairs

More than 20 Japanese children, ranging from 12 to 14 years of age, from the disaster-affected city of Rikuzentakata in northeastern Japan, visited Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka (CFAY) March 30 to April 1 for a special homestay, hosted by families living on Yokosuka base.

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Japanese children, ranging from 12 to 14 years of age, from the disaster-affected city of Rikuzentakata in northeastern Japan, visited CFAY March 30 to April 1 for a special homestay, hosted by families living on Yokosuka base. The weekend event included a variety MWR-arranged sports activities and a ship tour of *USS George Washington* (CVN 73).

arranged sports activities and a ship tour of the U.S. Navy's only forward-deployed aircraft carrier *USS George Washington* (CVN 73). The event was initiated and coordinated by the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, the TOMODACHI Initiative, the city of Rikuzentakata, and the non-profit organization Aid TAKATA, with the cooperation of officials and families of the base.

According to Rock Cheung, TOMODACHI Initiative communications and outreach manager, the TOMODACHI Initiative is a public-private partnership that supports Japan's recovery from the March 11, 2011 disasters, and invests in the next generation of Japanese and Americans in ways that deepen the long-term friendship between the two countries.

"The initiative builds upon the cooperation and spirit of friendship of the military humanitarian response effort "Operation Tomodachi," said Cheung. "It picks up where the operation left off, focusing on the longer-term recovery of the disaster-affected Tohoku region to not only give young people hope for the future, but also the skills and opportunities they need to make their dreams a reality. To do so, the TOMODACHI Initiative creates partnerships not only between the two governments, but also between both societies, including the business community, educators, civic groups and individuals."

The mission of TOMODACHI includes improving people-to-people ties between the United States and Japan, and creating new opportunities, such as this homestay event, for young people, especially from the disaster area.

"Doing a homestay event with Americans already in Japan, including some who participated in Operation Tomodachi last year, seemed to be an excellent opportunity," said Cheung. "The city of Rikuzentakata and the board of education there were responsible for choosing the students. Each of the students obviously had a different background, but they were united in the shared tragedy of March 11 and also in their interest in learning more about and interacting with Americans."

Cryptologic Technician (Technical) 1st class William Payne, assigned to Navy Information Operations Command, and his spouse Rebecca Payne, were one of the 20 families from the base who participated in the on base homestay and did so because they wanted to help and give back to those children who have been displaced due to the events of March 11, 2011.

"I like the idea of helping less fortunate kids and opening my home to them," Rebecca said. "My spouse thought it was a very considerate event. Opening up the base to them not only helps our community but it also shows the children that we want to help."

Barbara Bauer-Chen, whose spouse is assigned to Afloat Training Group Western Pacific, and their four children, were another family from the base who took part in the homestay event. Bauer-Chen, who has hosted Japanese homestay guests while living in Misawa, signed up for this homestay because of the cultural exchange opportunity.

"It is such a fantastic way to make lasting friendships and for our kids to really get to know that people from a different culture are actually a lot like us," said Bauer-Chen. It also helps build ties between our two cultures. I'm thrilled to be living in Japan and that my children are able to experience such a beautiful culture, especially through homestay experiences and friendships."

Communication didn't seem to be too much of a problem as the Payne family used a translation application on their smart phone while the Bauer-Chen family was able to speak some Japanese and they and their guests watched some movies with both Japanese and English subtitles.

"All of us spoke at least some Japanese, and (our guest) spoke some English, so we were able to communicate," said Bauer-Chen's 14-year old daughter Danielle. "Sometimes the language barrier got in our way, but we got away with Janglish (Japanese and English combined). (Our guest) even taught us a few words in Japanese."

Cheung hopes that the homestay event helped the Yokosuka base community meet the TOMODACHI goal of deepening ties between the United States and Japan on both sides of these two countries.

"We think it was particularly great for the children of Rikuzentakata to get to know U.S. Navy personnel on a personal basis, many of whom came to the aid of their region in the wake of the disaster last year. We're very pleased with how the program worked out, and understand that those involved found it a worthwhile and very rewarding experience," Cheung said.

"We sincerely appreciate the Navy's support for the program, in particular those who were responsible for organizing the events and particularly for the families who opened their homes to the children. We also hope that the program had a positive impact on the children who participated, and gave them an opportunity to learn more about America, Americans, and our relationship with Japan," he added.

For more information on the TOMODACHI Initiative, visit their website at http://usjapantomodachi.org/.

CFAY PWD Environmentalgram

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