

KIZUNA Project

Special Feature (2)

Now let's hear from **Ms April Zhao** and **Ms Simone Zhao** (not related), who are students at North Sydney Girls' High School. At the end of last year, April and Simone, then in Year 10, travelled to Japan on the KIZUNA Youth-Exchange Project with Asia-Oceania and North America. April and Simone wrote jointly about their experiences.



This Kizuna trip from 3 to 13 December 2012 was one of the most memorable experiences of our lives. It was a great opportunity that brought together close to 700 students from different countries across the Asia-Pacific region.

Everything we did and learnt about in the Tohoku area was so inspiring for high school students. The experiences and interactions with the local people and participants brought much meaning and opened up new doors and ideas for us to ponder.

"One part of this trip was to visit and observe the recovery of disaster-affected areas after the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami last year. On the third day, a total of 700 students were divided up into 7 different groups to visit 7 different disaster-affected areas within the Tohoku region. The group that I was with visited Kuji city in Iwate Prefecture. Some of the activities that we participated in in Kuji City included decorating wooden boards to be used to path a forest walkway, making local food with the local people, learning to tie fishing knots from the local fishermen and embarking on the local Sanriku train that gave us a tour around Tanohata to Kuji station to observe the disaster-affected areas.

"In particular the stories that were shared by the train conductor aboard the Sanriku Railway train left a deep impression on me about the sense of

duty and the 'group mindset' that Japanese people hold dearly. After the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami occurred last year the Sanriku Railway line was closed due to the damage to a large portion of route. However, the Sanriku Railway company believed that there was a real need for the railway to be restored as it was a cheaper and more efficient way of receiving relief goods and services from local communities. Thus the workers and some local volunteers

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slowly rebuilt portions of the Sanriku Railway line. Due to the group efforts and commitments from the workers and volunteers, the route that we took from Tanohata to Kuji station (a two hour one way trip) was able to be restored within a short period of time." (Simone)

"Another part of the Kizuna Programme was a home-stay where each of us would split off into smaller groups to live (some in pairs, some individually) with a Japanese family and experience the Japanese lifestyle

for ourselves. I found myself warmly welcomed by my host family and showered with love and care and I was truly accepted as a member. Part of the programme is going back home and telling everyone about what I had seen and done. However, home-stay gave me an opportunity to tell my host family and the people in the immediate area about the tsunami-affected region and so we all were the carriers of the 'Kizuna' message. We took with us the stories and the knowledge of what had happened in Japan and what is still unfolding. Everywhere we went, a new bond was formed and we felt hope and renewal." (April)

All the people we met at the disaster affected areas have been such an inspiration. The resilient mindset of evacuees and their patience are the qualities that we found inspiring and we will share their stories with friends and family here in Australia.

What the Kizuna project gave us was a chance to meet students from different countries and connect not only with Japan but forge relationships with various countries such as Vietnam, Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand, and many more. We are all the next generation - the future of this planet. The 'bonds' we made with fellow students in Japan and abroad will surely last a lifetime.

We formed strong *kizuna* over the Program which transcended borders and nations. We now have a strong appreciation for the purpose of the Kizuna Program and hope to be more active in encouraging interested, like-minded youth to forge links with Japan and support the recovery effort. We encourage prospective high school students to participate in similar programs next year and in the future.

We are sincerely grateful for this once in a lifetime opportunity and thank everyone who made it possible.



Simone (front row right with furry jacket on knees) with the home-stay group hosted by Kanagawa Sougou High School.

April Zhao & Simone Zhao