

KIZUNA Project

Special Feature (3)

Our third contribution is by **Mr Mendel Liang**, a student at Sydney Boys' High School, who went on the KIZUNA program for high school students in December 2012. He begins by telling us his reasons for applying for the program.

Growing up fascinated by Asian cultures, I have always been interested in Japan and its culture. It has always been one of my personal goals to one day find myself in Japan, experiencing the food, the people, and the sights. The Kizuna Project was aimed at high school students who had an interest in Japanese culture, and were currently studying Japanese as a subject at school. A friend of mine who had recently spent the summer as a transfer student in Japan brought this program to my attention. Following an application, and an interview, I found myself among 200 Australian students and 32 Australian educators all departing for Japan early in December, 2012.

Kizuna, which translates into 'bonds', was a program designed to raise awareness about the recovery efforts by the people of Japan following the March 2011 earthquakes. Upon arrival to Narita Airport, we were given tags to indicate what part of Tohoku we would be visiting. My name tag was grey; I was part of the group that would visit Ten-Ei Village. Furthermore, I was part of the group that would spend four days homestay in Fukuoka, after our tour of the Ten-Ei Village area. Although I had been told that the total number of people on the program was 660 from 14 different countries, it was an amazing sight to see so many

people from different countries gathered in one area.

During our stay at Ten-Ei Village, we were taken to various areas where we were exposed to the effects of the earthquake. Although there were no direct damages caused by the earthquake itself, due to the radiation scare from the Fukushima power plants, the main industries of rice farming and tourism suffered greatly as a result. We spent time learning about the efforts of the people to remove any trace of radiation from food grown in the area, and their success in doing so. As a group, we were also privileged to meet the people who had to move out of their houses due to the exclusion zone

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imposed around the Fukushima reactors. Many were living in temporary housing which was constructed to aid them. Some were also still paying their mortgages for houses which they could no longer live in. Though my time in Ten-Ei was short, I gained an understanding of the challenges that the people had overcome, and those which still remain. During our closing ceremony



Mendel with the coordinator of activities in the Ten-Ei Village area prior to departure.

at the village, we were given *okiagari* dolls as a gift [see p.4]. The dolls, which always return to an upright position no matter how they are pushed, represent success, overcoming adversity, and recovery from misfortune.

After a short return to Tokyo, we caught a plane over to Fukuoka, where I was able to experience living in Japan for a memorable four days. During this time, we were exposed to ramen and gyoza (dumpling) making, as well as Japanese high schools. The people I met during this time, especially my host family who kindly let me reside in their home for the duration of our stay in Fukuoka, were all polite and welcoming people.

Although the entire program was an extremely positive experience, the highlight of the trip was the people that I met. One of the aims of the program was: "To strengthen bonds with other countries through sharing the experience of suffering and recovering from the disaster". Many of the participants from other countries, and throughout Australia still correspond with me through social networking, promoting bonds between people of other countries.

I am sure that in the future, I will be returning to Japan to experience more of the culture, as well as revisit the people that I have made bonds with in Japan. I would like to thank JICE, AFS, the Japanese Government, my Host Family, Fellow Kizuna Participants, and everyone else that helped us have such an incredible experience in Japan.

Mendel Liang



The Fukuoka/ Fukuoka Minami homestay group, part of the grey group going to Ten-ei Village.