

**PRESS ANNOUNCEMENT**  
**For Immediate Release**

Contact:  
Lori Matoba, lmatoba@jcccnc.org  
Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California  
1840 Sutter Street • San Francisco, CA 94115  
(415) 567-5505 • www.jcccnc.org

**Shinzen USA Nikkei Youth Goodwill Sports Participants Travel to Japan for Final Year**

San Francisco (August 24, 2009) – The thirteenth and final year of the Shinzen USA Nikkei Youth Goodwill Sports Program saw nearly 80 participants from the Bay Area—21 youth basketball players, their families and staff—traveled to Japan July 27 for a weeklong grassroots exchange trip.

The Shinzen Program was created by the JCCCNC and the Office of the Consulate General of Japan in San Francisco to create a connection between youth in Japan and Japanese American youth. In 1997, the program's inaugural year, 20 youth and their families traveled to Japan in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the San Francisco-Osaka Sister City relationship. Since then, more than 300 Bay Area youth have participated in the program—either traveling to Japan, or, on alternate years, hosting their Japanese counterparts.

This year's theme, "Shinzen Forever," was a reminder that although the program in its current state is ending, the friendships and bonds created by the spirit of Shinzen will always remain. Many of the program's former participants, who often described their experiences as "life changing," have remained involved through community activities and subsequent trips to Japan for leisure, or as exchange students and Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program participants.

This year, participants began with a tour of Osaka and an evening welcome reception at the Osaka YMCA where they met their host families with whom they'd be staying with for four nights. The next morning was spent further getting to know their Japanese counterparts through games, dancing, creating photo quilts and the making and sharing of friendship bracelets. Lunch was followed by Friendship Basketball Games; teams were a mix of U.S. and Japan participants, boys and girls, and current and past participants. Many siblings of current participants are Shinzen USA alumni; also in attendance were Osaka alumni.



Another highlight was a trip to Osaka City Hall where the players met with Vice Mayor of Osaka Keizo Kitayama, several members of the Osaka City Council, the S.F.-Osaka Sister City Committee and the president of Shinkin Bank. Shinzen USA girls' team member Katie Endo was

among those who addressed the crowd, and Kiyoshi Moran of the boys' team presented a letter to Osaka from San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom that introduced the Shinzen team. A plaque marking the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (in 2006) of the San Francisco-Osaka Sister City relationship was later dedicated in Nakanoshima Park, with girls team member Kylie Uyeda representing Shinzen USA during the official ceremony. Goodwill games with the Osaka YMCA participants followed at the Tennoji Sports Center with the USA team winning both games.

After four nights in Osaka, the Shinzen USA players traveled to Kobe for another busy day. They began their morning at an orphanage that previous teams had also visited, the Nagata Kodomo Home, where they made crafts, danced, sang, took photos and shared lunch with more than 20 children. Afternoon goodwill basketball games hosted by the Kobe YMCA and the Kobe City Board of Education resulted in more new friendships between the Kobe and Shinzen USA youth. The Shinzen USA players spent the night in Kobe with their host families before heading back to Osaka for one final night.



Back in Osaka, Shinya Uemura, long-time coach of the Osaka Shinzen team and father of a 2008-09 participant, welcomed the group to Toyosaki Junior High School, where he is a teacher. Along with a musical welcome from the school band, the Shinzen USA players were treated to a tour to see what school life is like for teenagers in Japan. The boys won their game, and in the true spirit

of Shinzen, the final game ended for the girls in a tie. The day concluded with the Shinzen Farewell Reception at Taikoen. JCCCNC Executive Director Paul Osaki, Kobe Coach Kazuhiro Oda, Osaka Coach Masahiro Ueno and JCCCNC staff member Ruby Hata, who has been a part of each Shinzen trip to Japan, remarked on how the program has touched their own lives, and commented that the many young people who have participated in and the friendships formed through the program are the “seeds for the future.” Other highlights included a slideshow covering all 13 years of the program, a hip-hop dance by the Shinzen USA team, a spirited Soran Bushi dance by the Osaka youth, the “Shinzen Forever” odori danced by everyone and the boisterous YMCA song and dance finale, a standard at all Shinzen farewell parties.



Aya Nogami and Hiroya Koto (center) from the Osaka team with some of the Shinzen USA team at the Osaka Shinkansen Station

The next day, August 4<sup>th</sup>, participants departed on the Shinkansen bullet train bound for Hiroshima. They were met at the train station by Osaka YMCA staff, coaches and two players. Saying their final goodbyes and seeing the Shinzen USA team members board the train, Hiroya Koto of the Osaka boys’ team and visitor to San Francisco last summer could not hold back tears as the doors shut and the train began to pull away. Understanding Hiroya’s emotion, USA counterpart Kinji Steimetz recalled, “My favorite part of the trip was interacting with the Japanese kids. I was able to make many new friends, even with the language barrier. The Shinzen trip was truly an experience that I will remember and cherish for the remainder of my life.”

In Hiroshima, the group paid an emotional visit to the Peace Memorial Museum—which commemorates the atomic bombing of Hiroshima by the United States on August 6, 1945—walked through the Peace Park to pay respects at the cenotaph for the victims of the atomic bomb, then presented their 1,000 cranes at the Children’s Memorial Monument, in memory of Sadako and in hopes of future peace.

The day ended with a final group Sayonara Party with reflections from players, parents, grandparents and staff and closing with a slideshow of the trip and releasing of fusen jet balloons. And, of course, “YMCA.”

The Shinzen youth volunteered to keep a journal to post their daily thoughts during their trip to Japan. At first they expressed their exhaustion, commented on the long travel day and the extremely humid weather, but after the first day their thoughts then began to turn to their actual experiences. Following are excerpts from their journals:



Jackie Wong (#25) and Kylie Uyeda (#32) meeting their Kobe host family.

Prior to the trip, Kylie Uyeda, Daly City, wrote about her expectations: *“In Japan, there are many things I hope to learn and experience. I want to learn about every day life as a Japanese teenager. I think it will be quite different and hard for me, an American, to adapt but fun to experience. I’m looking forward to trying new things and pushing myself to get out of my comfort zone.”* Kylie closed her Shinzen journal

with this: *“I used to think that people can’t be friends if they can’t communicate, and we’re across the Pacific in a different time zone. Now I know that it is possible. I’ve witnessed it with my own eyes, how two people become friends despite a language barrier.”*

*“When we first started, I didn’t understand the meaning of goodwill and friendship, I just thought, basketball and Japan - that sounds like fun, but it was way more than that. We volunteered, went to events, like Consul General’s reception and at Osaka City Hall, we learned about the bond in Hiroshima and played with the kids at the Kodomo Home (orphanage).”* And her thoughts on friendship, *“I learned that friendships can spread and maintain for probably my whole life. These friendships that I made in Japan will always be remembered.”*

Amada Joo, Santa Clara



Amanda Joo with her Osaka host family, the Nogami's.

These are just a few thoughts from the players and we hope to share more photos and stories soon. These memorable moments would not be possible without the support of many other organizations, donors and countless volunteers who have continued to give to this Program over the years. The 2009 Shinzen Program would like to especially thank the following for their continued contributions and generosity: Consulate General of Japan in San Francisco, The Henri and Tomoye Takahashi Charitable Foundation, Japan Airlines, Comcast, Kintetsu International Travel, Mr. Allen and Mrs. Pat Okamoto, Mr. Mits and Mrs. Sadame Kojimoto and the San Francisco Drakes Organization.

**About the Shinzen Program:**

In 1995, the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California (JCCCNC) and the Office of the Consulate General of Japan in San Francisco agreed that although there were a substantial number of traditional, cultural and intellectual exchanges between the U.S. and Japan, there existed a greater need for meaningful dialogue between youth in Japan and Japanese American youth. Through these discussions was born the Shinzen (international goodwill or amity) USA Nikkei Youth Goodwill Program, formed to create a more dynamic and meaningful exchange between the youth and to provide unique opportunities for building a foundation for the exchange of ideas and important values of our young people today.

The Shinzen players work to achieve these goals with their peers by creating friendships on a grassroots level to help reinforce a future of global peace and goodwill. In its inaugural year (1997) in celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the San Francisco-Osaka Sister City Relationship, 20 youth and their families represented our community as goodwill ambassadors. Over the years over 300 Bay Area youth have participated in the Program and have shared their “shinzen” with their counterparts in Japan. Past Shinzen players continue to stay involved in community activities and many have taken a strong interest in learning more about Japan, its people and culture through subsequent trips to Japan as exchange students, JET program participants or leisure travel.

**About the JCCCNC**

Envisioned by the Japanese American community, the JCCCNC will be an everlasting foundation of our Japanese American ancestry, cultural heritage, histories and traditions. The JCCCNC strives to meet the evolving needs of the Japanese American community through programs, affordable services and facility usage. The JCCCNC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit community center based in San Francisco.

# # #