



## **PRESS ANNOUNCEMENT For Immediate Release**

Contact:

Lori Matoba, Deputy Director, [Lmatoba@jcccnc.org](mailto:Lmatoba@jcccnc.org)  
Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California  
1840 Sutter Street, San Francisco, CA 94115  
(415) 567-5505, [www.jcccnc.org](http://www.jcccnc.org)

### **Takahashi Youth Ambassador Fellowship Program**

*San Francisco (August 8, 2011)* – From July 19 - 31, 2011, ten youth traveled to Japan for the inaugural Takahashi Ambassador Youth Fellowship Program, organized by the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California (JCCCNC) and sponsored by The Henri and Tomoye Takahashi Charitable Foundation. The program, which is designed to develop leadership and civic skills and instill a stronger understanding and appreciation of culture and identity through first-hand experiences, offered many unique opportunities not found with typical group tours. These unique experiences ranged from a visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to a two-night stay at a farming village in Kinsen Waiwai Mura.

The ten youth who participated in the inaugural Takahashi Youth Ambassador Fellowship Program was: Mina Han, Owen Iwamasa Angeline Junaedy, Grant Kawahatsu, Yumi Kobayashi, Kristen Koyama, Danny Souza, Whitney Tamaki, Colin Wong and Laura Kim Yee.

On their first stop the Takahashi Fellows were able to experience a bit of Tokyo's culture by shopping in the Asakusa, tasting Monja-yaki, a traditional Tokyo favorite, and exploring the Tokyo Edo Museum. Also on their itinerary were visits to Tokyo University, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Diet, and the famous Shibuya district, where they experienced some of the hustle and bustle of Tokyo.

During their visit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Takahashi Fellows were able to have a group discussion with the staff. During the discussion, Takahashi Fellow, Grant Kawahatsu, asked the question, "What message (about the earthquake, tsunami and pending nuclear situation) would you like us as youth ambassadors to bring back to America?" Ms. Akiko Sugita answered by asking the Takahashi Fellows how they felt, "Do you feel safe?" As the Fellows all answered, "yes," she continued, "Please let them know in America that Japan is safe and to please visit."

Following their stay in the big city of Tokyo, the Takahashi Fellows made their way to Kisen Waiwai Mura, a traditional Japanese farming village built by the City of Osaka and managed by the Osaka YMCA. This area replicates farm living in the early 1800s. The youth spent two days and two nights living in this village with the hope of learning



how to live a more environmentally conscious lifestyle and give the Fellows a better perspective on how some of their ancestor's lived. The Fellows learned basic farming techniques from plowing the land, to harvesting ripened fruits and vegetables that they used to cook their meals over an open fire. They were also given the opportunity to partake in traditional activities such as mochi pounding and making their own straw slippers, which are traditions hard to find today in modern Japan.

Ryan Kimura, Director of Programs for the JCCCNC, mentioned of the Fellows stay at the village, "Many learned the value of hard work and to appreciate everyday luxuries. This was their first time living in a communal setting, caring not only for their own health, but also for the group/community's well being. The meals took around three hours to prepare and from the collective preparation of meals to delegating farming duties, the Fellows walked away with a once in a lifetime experience in a traditional Japanese setting. Many of the Fellows enjoyed the Waiwai Mura village because it brought them closer to their ancestors, but also created strong bonds within the group."

The next leg of their journey brought them to the Disaster Reduction and Human Renovation Institution in Kobe where they were able to see the destruction that struck the area in 1995. Here they learned about the resilience of the Japanese people and the many that came to help, including the JCCCNC, aiding in the rebuilding of the area to what it is today.

The JCCCNC, along with the Kobe YMCA, helped rebuild the Nagata Kodomo Home orphanage after the Great Hanshin earthquake in 1995. The ten Takahashi Fellows visited this orphanage and were able to create strong bonds during their three hour visit. Angeline Junaedy said, "Saying goodbye was not easy. I saw how their [children] facial expressions changed. Although, they were smiling and waving, something in their faces was saying they wanted us to stay." Laura Yee adds, "the time at the Nagata Kodomo Home really made me reflect on the family that I have and see things from the children's point of view. I myself am adopted, so this experience has made me think about how my life would've been different if it weren't for my parents. That idea makes me very sad and very grateful for what I have because I can't imagine growing up without any family or people to actually care about me." The Takahashi Fellows have already discussed ways they can stay involved in supporting the children and the Nagata Kodomo Home.

The following day, the Takahashi Fellows enjoyed a day at the Kobe City College of Technology (KCCT) where they shared information and had discussion with students there, about school life, club (after-school) activities, hobbies and other interest. The Takahashi Fellows also introduced the Cha-cha Slide to students and staff of the KCCT. The KCCT students showed the Takahashi Fellows how they program iphone applications, as well as *kyudo*, Japanese archery, showing them that along with technology the school also teaches them traditional cultural arts.



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The Takahashi Program officially ended with a Graduation Ceremony on July 30 at the Kobe YMCA. All of the Takahashi Fellows spoke and thanked their host family. Colin Wong said, "As a guest I felt obligated to inconvenience my host family as little as possible, so their hospitality as hosts always left me with an awkward mix of guilt and gratitude. I don't think it's possible to say thank you enough. Being part of the Yabuchi family has been the best part of this trip!"

After spending a couple of extra days sightseeing in Kyoto, the group returned home on July 31 to a group of friends and family. A few days' after their return, Alice and Masato Kawahatsu shared their own feelings about their son Grant's experience with the program, "Grant was especially moved by many of the experiences he encountered and little by little, he shares with us how this trip has moved him deeply and helped him to grow as a person and leader. He truly realized how blessed he was to have his family, his friends, his community and all the support he has been receiving his whole life. Witnessing this transformation brought tears to Mas and my eyes as we had prayed and hoped that he would feel and realize this deeply on this journey. As parents, we were so happy that he was able to bond with the people of Japan and share his heart with others."

"As this was the inaugural year of the Takahashi Youth Ambassador Fellowship Program, the JCCCNC will encourage these ten Fellows to stay actively involved with the JCCCNC and their own communities, as leaders and advocates," mentions Lori Matoba, Deputy Director of the JCCCNC. She adds, "The Takahashi Fellows already have plans to continue to support the children at the Nagata Kodomo Home and are looking at ways to share what they learned about Japan with others, especially youth their age."

For more information on the Takahashi Youth Ambassador Fellowship Program, please call the JCCCNC at (415) 567-5505 or visit [www.jcccnc.org](http://www.jcccnc.org) to read more about the Takahashi Fellows trip to Japan and upcoming projects.

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### **About JCCCNC**

Envisioned by the Japanese American community, 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 administrative support and facilities for other local service organizations. The JCCCNC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit community center based in San Francisco.