



**PRESS ANNOUNCEMENT  
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**JCCCNC's Shinzen Program Returns from Japan**

As members of the Shinzen Nikkei Youth Goodwill Program Tour took their first steps off the airplane, the excitement and a little bit of anxiety began. This was no ordinary tour to Japan, it was a culmination of 14-months of learning, sharing and working together to better understand their Japanese American culture, history and heritage. They were also traveling to Japan as goodwill ambassadors to meet new friends and strengthen relationships that were built after two devastating events, the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami in Tohoku and the 1995 Hanshin-Awaji earthquake in Kobe and Osaka.

After a brief stop in Tokyo to get a nights rest, everyone was up early to take the Shinkansen to Sendai. The group visited one of the three most beautiful sights in Japan, Matsushima Bay. Our welcome lunch was one of only two times our group would gather together. It was great to see the group of 94 together - many three generation families, ranging in age from 8-86, from the Bay Area, San Jose and also Georgia and Hawaii.

Our tour was nine-days long, but the time went by quickly. The group was first hosted by the Sendai YMCA. It was the first welcome reception for the Shinzen youth to meet their host families and leave the comfort of the group and their parents. They were excited and a little anxious, but the welcome greetings and smiles by host families eased the anxiety in all of the youth as they cheerfully left for three nights with their new family. Shinzen boys' team member Connor Nakamura said "The highlight of my trip was definitely spending time with the homestay family. From the first moments at the Sendai YMCA, I was greeted by a bright-faced grandmother, a mom and her three children. The grandparents were friendly and helpful for our entire stay, even until the very end when our bus left the hotel for the airport. I am extremely grateful for the time they dedicated towards my cultural enrichment."

The following morning the group left for a day in Kesennuma, one of the coastal towns devastated by the March 2011 tsunami. Arriving in three buses, the group made a quick stop at the San San Recovery Mall in Minami Sanriku to learn about the strength of the tsunami and efforts of the staff who worked in its Emergency Disaster Building, including a young 25-year old who sacrificed her life and remained on the loudspeaker to warn residents of the tsunami, before heading to the town of Kesennuma. The youth then went to the grounds of Seiryō Temple where NPO Hamawarasu activities are based for an afternoon of nagashi somen, games and fun with the youth of Hamawarasu. The parents had lunch and visited the Shark Museum exhibit on 3.11 before meeting the youth at our final destination Jifukuji Temple to learn about 3.11 from Priest Katayama. It was an enlightening experience for all, through stories and song we were able to really feel the emotion that Priest Katayama continues to feel after the tragic events that took the lives and livelihood from his Temple members. The day ended with tree planting by all Shinzen participants at Umibe no Mori o Tsukurou. Shinzen parent Sandra Suzaki said "The tree planting project in Kesennuma and the speech from Priest Katayama impressed me most." "His speech was one that touched me and hope that our younger generations will hold what they have learned close to their heart."

On the final full day in Sendai, the morning began with an udon making experience and lunch with teachers and students at the YMCA hotel and culinary school. The Shinzen youth learned to better appreciate the care it takes to make a meal as they mixed, rolled and cut their own noodles prepared from flour and water. The group then headed to Tohoku Gakuin Tsutsujigaoka High School for the first goodwill basketball games followed by a game where the Shinzen USA Team and Tohoku Gakuin players were mixed to play together. It was a great ice breaker that carried over to the Farewell

Reception at the Westin Hotel. Players from both teams, family members, host families, staff and board members from the Sendai YMCA, along with a few guests from Hamawarasu gathered to reminisce about the memorable moments shared during our short visit there. Shinzen girls team member Tomi Eijima said “it was touching to see how close we became with the Tojoku Gakuin teams in such a short time. This night made me realize that this is why we went on this trip – to create cross cultural relationships with the youth of Japan. Although we may never cross paths with the Japanese students again, I left knowing that we brought joy and friendships to this city.” The reception ended with a Shinzen Obon dance to the Shinsei Band’s Sakura Matsuri Ondo and dancing to the YMCA.

On July 29, the group arrived in Kobe where we were welcomed by Kobe YMCA Chairman, and first time host family father, Motoo Nakamichi. He recognized the long history the JCCCNC had with the Kobe YMCA that began from relief and recovery support following the 1995 Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake and wished all participants to enjoy their time together. The following morning, youth arrived with their host families at Keimei Gakuin High School. The boys had an exciting come from behind victory while the Shinzen USA girls team gave a valiant effort in their game. The teams and audience were also treated to spectacular halftime exhibitions by the school’s cheerleading squad.

While in Kobe, the Shinzen teams also had a short visit to learn about the 1995 earthquake and volunteerism with Disaster Area Cooperated Center. It was interesting to hear about what took place after the earthquake and how the thought of volunteerism has evolved in Japan since the 1995 disaster. The Center has been involved in supporting other disasters in Japan over the years, including the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami and the recent earthquake and flooding in Kumamoto.

The trip would not be complete without a visit to the Nagata Kodomo Home, an orphanage that the JCCCNC has been supporting since 1995. The Shinzen teams visit there, although short, brought many of the most memorable and heartwarming thoughts from our Bay Area youth. Izumi Murase said “I really enjoyed the Nagata Kodomo Home. All the kids were so nice and so full of happiness. It made me so happy to be around them and it inspired me to be more positive myself. One child, who I helped with the crafts, was Riku-kun. He was five years old. He was shy at first but he later opened up more. He was so adorable and so full of joy, it made me sad to think that he didn't have the opportunities that I've had. After the visit, I was so grateful for my parents and my community that provided me with opportunities like this program. I hope other people get to experience Shinzen as I did.”

The farewell reception in Kobe, truly tied the theme “Obon: a Gathering of Joy,” together. Although the programs relationships began from disasters, this farewell was more a celebration of 20+ years of friendship with the people and organizations who helped build the Shinzen Program over the years. Former staff, board members, coaches and friends came together after the program’s eight year absence as if we had not missed a day or year. That is the true spirit of Shinzen - which was reflected in reflections from players. “

Although basketball is what first excited members to join the program 14-months ago, it has been the camaraderie, friendship and working together that has made this trip special for the 18 youth and their families. Through their participation in homestays, the youth were able to see similarities and contrasts, but for many they have come to better appreciate the comforts of their homes and family lifestyles. This appreciation along with visiting Japan with their families is one we hope will stay with them for years to come,” Deputy Director Lori Matoba stated. For more information about JCCCNC youth development and U.S. Japan programs please visit our website at [www.jcccnc.org](http://www.jcccnc.org).

### **Shinzen Program History**

In 1997, the 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 Nikkei Youth Goodwill Program, formed to create a more dynamic and meaningful exchange between the youth and to provide unique opportunities for the exchange of ideas and important values among young people. The Shinzen players work to achieve these goals by creating friendships at a local level to help reinforce a future of global peace and goodwill. Since the inaugural visit to Japan, over 1200 participants (players and their families) have visited Japan or hosted a Japanese youth in their home for the Shinzen Program. Over

the years, Shinzen alumni have continued to stay involved in the Japanese American community, as youth coaches, volunteers, community interns, and many have returned to Japan to continue to build and foster international relations and stay connected to their cultural heritage.

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**About the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California (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.