JCCNC Shinzen Program to Leave for Japan Next Week

Eighteen young Japanese Americans will play in goodwill basketball games and honor earthquake and tsunami victims.

July 18, 2017 (San Francisco) – From July 24 to August 4, the Shinzen Nikkei Youth Goodwill Program (Shinzen Program) ambassadors will travel to Japan, where they will play basketball and build friendships with Japanese youth in Sendai and Kobe. The trip is both in remembrance and celebration of the lives of the victims of the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake and the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami—two of Japan’s most destructive natural disasters.

The Shinzen Program promotes the exchange of friendship, culture and compassion between Japanese and Japanese American (JA) youth. This year’s theme—SHINZEN OBON “A Gathering of Joy”—reflects how the young people can joyfully create bonds and learn about one another’s communities even though the underlying reason for their meeting is sad. The Buddhist festival Obon, which is celebrated by Japanese and JA people, was chosen because in a similar vein, participants remember those that have passed through happy dancing.

The Shinzen Program will collaborate with the Sendai YMCA and Kobe YMCA to coordinate basketball games, cultural exchange activities and homestays. The friendship between the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California (JCCCNC) and the two YMCAs stems from the recovery efforts after the 1995 and 2011 earthquakes. In response to each, the JCCCNC established relief funds raising millions of dollars for the victims.

When the Shinzen members and their families go to Sendai, they will spend time in the coastal town of Kesennuma, which was devastated by the 2011 tsunami. There, the youth will visit the nonprofit organization Hamawarasu, formed in 2015 to educate the local children about tsunami safety and refamiliarize them with the sea. The entire group will visit Jifukuji Temple where they will meet Priest Katayama, who lost many congregants to the tsunami. He is advocating for the creation of a “green wall”—a seawall made from trees rather than concrete—to protect the town from future disasters yet allow residents to enjoy views of the sea.

In Kobe, the participants will visit an earthquake disaster center and the Nagata Kodomo Home, an orphanage the JCCCNC helped rebuild after the 1995 earthquake. At the orphanage, the Shinzen members will make crafts and enjoy an outdoor matsuri (festival) style lunch with the children. The group will also explore various neighborhoods and historical landmarks in Kyoto and Osaka.

Since early 2016, the youth ambassadors—eight boys and ten girls, who are in or entering high school—have devoted considerable time to tour preparation, attending both basketball practices and weekly workshops. Last year, the workshops focused on their family and JA history. This year, they have centered around the Japan trip—including basic Japanese
language, customs and etiquette, an introduction to the places they will visit, and a visualization activity of the earthquake and tsunami. Their biggest project was creating a family history book to preserve the community’s stories and better understand their JA identity.

“I learned that I am part of a community whose ancestors fought for a better life for me and other Japanese Americans,” said Ryan Kawamura, a Shinzen boys team member.

The Shinzen Program also involved the Bay Area JA community in its preparation. The ambassadors volunteered at JCCCNC events, like its annual Colma Japanese Cemetery clean up, and held multiple fundraisers. The youth themselves raised over $35,000 through raffle ticket sales. The grand prize winner of (2) tickets to Japan, courtesy of Japan Airlines, was Peninsula resident Kelly Higashionna.

The program began in 1995 as a joint effort between the JCCCNC and Office of the Consulate General of Japan, and the first tour took place in 1997. The Kobe and Osaka YMCAs have greatly contributed to the program since its inauguration. Through basketball—which has always been a focal point of the JA community—the Shinzen Program hopes to develop constructive dialogue and goodwill exchange between Japanese and JA youth.

In 2009, the Shinzen Program was retired. However, in 2016, the JCCCNC relaunched the program to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami and the 110th anniversary of San Francisco’s Japantown.

The JCCCNC hopes that through experiencing Japanese culture and interacting with Japanese their age, the young ambassadors will grow to care about their heritage. The 2017 tour emphasizes the value of gathering together to honor and celebrate the lives of those who have passed—similar to the summer Obon festivals at which people joyfully dance in remembrance of their ancestors.

“We understand that a first-hand cultural experience is invaluable in helping the youth in our Japanese American community develop and define their identity, while also establishing a greater connection to their sometimes seemingly distant heritage,” said Paul Osaki, Executive Director of the JCCCNC. “It is by experiencing things on their own that the history and heritage of their ancestors is realized.”

The JCCCNC and Shinzen Ambassadors will post updates on the JCCCNC’s facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/LikeJCCCNC/), so be on the lookout to see what they’re up to. The Shinzen Program would not be possible without the generous support of the Henri and Tomoye Takahashi Charitable Foundation, the Consulate General of Japan in San Francisco, Japan Airlines, Kintetsu International, the Shinzen families and the many donors and supporters of their fundraisers. For more information about the Shinzen Program, visit www.jcccnc.org.

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About the JCCCNC
Envisioned by the Japanese American community, the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California (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 non-profit community center based in San Francisco.