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Iizuka students at the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, California

First Steps on American Soil - A report on the *Iizuka to Sunnyvale* Exchange Program

BY MARK KATO

From August 20-27, twenty Japanese students from Iizuka Junior High School visited Sunnyvale. For most of them, this was their first visit to the United States. The *Iizuka to Sunnyvale* educational exchange program, organized by the SSCA, was designed to take the students and their chaperones on a whirlwind educational tour of many of California's famous sights.

Upon touching down at San Francisco International Airport, the group has the chance to go sightseeing in San Francisco, Yosemite National Park, the San Jose Tech Museum, and Stanford University. Along with Yosemite's spectacular wilderness, the students were most impressed with their lunch at Google Headquarters in Mountain View.

Meeting Host Families

BY MARK KATO

Shortly after final bell on Friday, August 22, at Sunnyvale Middle School, the visiting Japanese students arrived to join their American host families. Prior to meeting, the students and families had communicated via email. Sunnyvale students Abby Han and Larissa Lai worked with adult chaperone Mr. Realini to decorate the staff room and welcome the Japanese students in style.

During a short ceremony, welcome speeches were delivered by Dr. Picard (Superintendent of Sunnyvale school district), Mr. Shahin (Principal of Sunnyvale Middle School), Ms. McKell (teacher at SMS), and former SMS student Larissa Lai. Representatives of Iizuka, Mr. Katamine (Superintendent of Iizuka school district) and Mr. Nishimuta (Iizuka Junior High School teacher), then delivered short messages of thanks to their American counterparts and the host families.

When the adults had finished, it was time for the students to introduce themselves one by one in English. They excitedly spoke of their goals during their stay in Sunnyvale, and they delighted their audience by expressing their desires to eat traditional American food. As the welcome ceremony ended, the students went home with their host families. Surely, burgers and pizza were featured on at least a few dinner tables!



Attending Sunnyvale Middle School

BY MARK KATO

On their first trip to an American school, the Iizuka students attended classes at Sunnyvale Middle School on Monday, August 25th and Tuesday, August 26th. Each student partnered with an American "buddy" and shadowed them throughout the day. It provided an excellent opportunity for the Japanese students to not only work on their English, but for all the students to experience how positive inter-cultural exchange can be. Though the language barrier made communication more challenging, the students made many new friends and were enriched by their time at SMS.



Tsubasa's First Home Stay

BY JIM MICHELOTTI

Word reached us that the students would show up at any moment. We took our positions, fixed our hair, and straightened our collars. We were electrified that this long-awaited introduction was about to occur. We had already developed a sense of unconditional loyalty to our young guest, and were excited to make his visit a success. A well-dressed boy approached our family.

"Tsubasa?" I asked. He energetically bowed and nodded with a big smile.

The next few days were a whirlwind of fun, with all of the events we had arranged. The simple moments, however, touched our hearts the most; hunched over a game with my two boys, hanging out with the neighborhood kids, catching a laugh while struggling to communicate. How could such a young boy be so polite and confident while so far from his home? And how did our boys rise so well to this occasion, looking after our guest with such responsibility? When it was time for Tsubasa to leave, the good-byes and tears said it best. These young Japanese travellers have not only had a great adventure, visiting a new land far away from their own, but they have also made some new friends along the way.



Hinako Sumi (center) and the Lai family.

A New Friend From Japan

BY HILARY LAI

From August 22 to August 27, Hinako Sumi, a Japanese student from Iizuka, Japan, was welcomed into our family. On our first day, we could only communicate with each other using hand gestures, simple English words, and phrases from my limited Japanese vocabulary. However, we soon bonded over pizza slices and frozen yogurt, and that was only the start of an unforgettable learning experience together. Hinako was eager to eat anything remotely "American", and we introduced to her *In-N-Out* burgers, grilled steak, pasta, and fried mozzarella sticks, among others. To me, these dishes were incorporated into my daily life and seemed insignificant, yet to Hinako they were almost treated as "gourmet".

Despite the language barrier, Hinako was eager to communicate with us. She impressed me by how willing she was to exhaust her means to be understood. She even declined the offer to call her family in Japan, suggesting that she wanted to make herself totally immersed in a "new family" that she could call her own for a few days. Ultimately, Hinako wanted to stay with us, and we all wished she could live in Sunnyvale with us forever. Our time with Hinako was short, but the friendship we found and shared will last many more years to come.



Pictured (left to right): Mr. Masahiro Aso, Nabil Shahin, Dr. Picard, Mr. Katamine, and Mr. Nobuhiro Watanabe.

Cherry Tree Planting

BY MARK KATO & HILARY LAI

As a part of the I2S exchange, cherry tree planting ceremonies were held on August 25, 2014 at the Sunnyvale City Hall, Sunnyvale Middle School, Fremont High School, Braly Park, and the Plug-and-Play Tech Center. Cherry trees are a notable symbol of Japan, and the cherry trees used were graciously donated by the city of Iizuka and the Iizuka Friendship Network. The planting of the trees were used to symbolize the beginning of a prosperous friendship between the two cities of Iizuka and Sunnyvale.

Notable guests included Masahiro Aso (son of the current vice prime minister of Japan), Makoto Katamine (Iizuka's superintendent), Nobuhiro Watanabe (Deputy Consul General of the Consulate General of Japan in San Francisco), Jim Griffith (mayor of Sunnyvale), Dr. Benjamin Picard (the superintendent of the Sunnyvale School District), and Nabil Shahin (principal of Sunnyvale Middle School). Faculty and students alike from both cities took part in the ceremonial planting, and simultaneously contributed to the fortifying of a friendship that will surely last a lifetime.



Sunnyvale and Iizuka students get together at Ortega Park for a farewell BBQ for the Iizuka students.

We Will Return

BY MARK KATO

Every journey must come to the end, no matter how joyous it was. The visiting Iizuka students attended a farewell BBQ at 4pm on August 26 at Ortega Park. Some students enjoyed their brief time in the USA so much that they expressed a desire to stay. The BBQ in the park was arranged in American style, and provided a happy memory for years to come. Most of the students said they planned to return to the USA again in the future. As many of the students expressed an interest in American foods, the farewell BBQ was a fitting celebration on their last day in the USA.

Sunnyvale Sister City Association in the Sunnyvale *District Digest*

Sunnyvale School District's online newspaper, *District Digest*, features more about the *Iizuka to Sunnyvale* and *Sunnyvale to Iizuka* trips. [Read the article.](#)

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We Need Sponsors

As a completely volunteer-run non-profit organization (501c3 pending), the Sunnyvale Sister City Association (SSCA) is looking for sponsors. The SSCA has three levels of sponsorship: GOLD (\$2,000 per year), SILVER (\$1,000 per year), and BRONZE (\$500 per year). Please help us continue to offer dynamic events to the community and support Sunnyvale's future generations. If you are interested, please send a message to **mark@sunnyvalesistercity.org**