

This is the third year of the student exchange program between Iizuka and Sunnyvale. The welcoming ceremony was kicked off beautifully with The Star-Spangled Banner, played by Shonai Junior High School brass band club. The 14 American students stood up and put their hands over their hearts. This was followed by a traditional Japanese folk song and pop songs, which accompanied dance performances by the club members. Ms. Yukiko Araragi, a supervisor of School Education Division of Iizuka Board of Education, nicely summed up the exchange, stating, "It was wonderful to hear the voices of excitement from the parents in Sunnyvale when seeing the movies shared on the internet."

Shonai Junior High School, where six Sunnyvale students visited, has built a strong international exchange program. The students interact with international students in Kyushu Institute of Technology every month. The school has accepted teachers' visits from developing countries in cooperation with JICA, and it says that about 50 foreigners visit the school a year. Mr. Osamura, an English language teacher, said, "Our students have many opportunities to meet with foreigners, and they are used to communicating in English."

The host families put a lot of thought into their hospitality. Some prepared school uniforms for the Sunnyvale students; others researched onsen (hot springs) where students who were shy about being naked while bathing could wear swimsuits.

Shonai Junior High School also planned some "Only-in-Iizuka" experiences, including the study of Yabusame (Japanese horseback archery) and rice planting. Unfortunately, these events were rained out, but Mr. Osamura said "We felt the prospect that foreign visitors would more satisfy with us if we can have support from local people."

This year, four schools accepted Sunnyvale students. Although the numbers of host schools has decreased (there were seven last year), each school provided unique activities, such as an experience of Japanese system of combined junior high and high school, and a Suibokuba (Indian ink painting) class by external lecturers. Ms. Araragi explained "A small group in each school is preferable than only one in a school. That makes the Sunnyvale people comfortable, and it is easy for the Iizuka schools to provide them productive hospitality as well."

During the farewell party at the primary residence of principal and former Prime

Minister, Taro Aso, the Sunnyvale students enjoyed dinner and conversation with their host siblings. It looked as though they had a deeper and more meaningful exchange compared to last year. And yet the students had only experience school life in Iizuka for two and a half days. Iizuka and Sunnyvale are developing a formal process to upgrade their relationship from 'friendship' to 'sister city,' and planning to extend the students' length of stay in Iizuka in the future.

Iizuka city registered as one of the host towns of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic games, and works to attract a training camp of the team South Africa. No doubt, Iizuka students, polished by these ongoing Japan-US exchanges, will shine in the front line of Omotenashi (Japanese hospitality) in four years.