Summary
With support from the TOMODACHI NAJAS grant program and in partnership with the Sendai International Relationship Association (SIRA), the Japan-America Society of Dallas/Fort Worth (JASDFW) organized the **Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors 2014**, a one-week exchange program for a group of nine high school students from the Dallas area. The program took place in and around Sendai, Japan, from July 1 to 6 and in Tokyo on July 7, 2014. The Young Ambassadors were accompanied by two chaperones representing JASDFW.

The students, joined by the 2013 Young Ambassadors from Sendai, enjoyed three days of group outings to City Hall, schools, and area highlights, followed by a weekend with their host families. Each student and one chaperone stayed with a host family and had a unique experience of Japanese life and Sendai culture. The week culminated in a festive farewell picnic with members of the Sendai International Relations Association (SIRA), Tohoku Japan America Association, and Sendai Kite Club.

The students then traveled to Tokyo where they toured the National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation and paid a visit to the U.S. Embassy – a memorable highlight of their experience as Young Ambassadors. The program profoundly affected the lives of hosts and students alike and strengthened bonds of friendship between Dallas and Sendai.

Background
The cities of Dallas and Sendai became International Friendship Cities in August 1997 and pledged “to work together to promote cultural understanding, educational exchange, and economic relations between our two nations.” Over the past 17 years, the two cities have held a variety of cultural, educational, and sports exchanges. Among the first was the Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors Program, started in 1998 as an ongoing, though not annual, series of student exchanges. Eight previous trips took place between 1998 and 2009, alternating between cities.

The Young Ambassadors program was temporarily suspended in 2011 because of the economic impact of the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami on Sendai. The largest city near the epicenter of the earthquake, Sendai suffered significant flooding, damage, injury, and loss of life. The TOMODACHI NAJAS grant made it possible for JASDFW and SIRA to resurrect the program in 2013 and to hold it in two consecutive years, thus building momentum and reciprocity.

Selection Process
TOMODACHI funding opened the Young Ambassadors opportunity to students of any socio-economic background and attracted a large pool of applicants – many more than in past years. The nine Young Ambassadors were carefully selected from 105 applicants. The group included five girls and four boys, ages 15 to 17, from nine public and charter schools. They represented the best and brightest youth in the greater Dallas area, as well as the ethnic diversity of the region.
JASDFW recruited students by publicizing the opportunity to Dallas area high schools, society members, and families that hosted the Sendai students in 2013. The World Affairs Council of Dallas/Fort Worth (WAC) was an important partner in this process, spreading the word through its extensive network of educators. WAC staff reported that teachers had been asking for this type of exchange program, but there were none in the community. JASDFW was able to fulfill a specific need in area schools through this program.

The application process included two stages – a written application and a group interview. Students first submitted an application form, recommendation letter, outline of extracurricular activities, and personal essay describing their interest in Japan, reasons for wanting to be an ambassador, and how they would share their experiences after returning to the U.S. A three-person selection committee scored the applications according to a pre-defined rubric and narrowed the pool to 27 students, who then participated in group interviews, three or four students at a time. The final nine Young Ambassadors were chosen based on high composite scores and group compatibility.

The selection committee included the two chaperones – Chrystal Sanders, JASDFW Membership and Communications Coordinator and a former JET (ALT), and Timothy C. Jones, a retired high school social studies teacher with extensive experience in Japan and leading student travel groups. The third member was Molly Lam, former Admissions Counselor for Temple University in Tokyo and JET alum (CIR).

**Orientation and Team-Building**

JASDFW held an orientation session for students and their parents and two student orientation workshops during the summer to prepare for the trip. The theme for these meetings was “prepare to discover.” The message to the students was “the more you learn, the richer the experience will be.”

Prior to the workshops, JASDFW set up a private Facebook group as a communication tool among students, parents, and chaperones. Students were encouraged to use it for open discussion about the trip. Chaperones asked cultural “questions of the day” and gave research topics. The students’ replies became a meaningful dialogue on Japanese society with educator Tim Jones. This process enabled the students to see the trip in a larger context and helped to prepare them as future leaders.

The two all-day workshops, held on Saturdays in June, included a variety of presentations and activities:

- Purpose and history of the Dallas-Sendai program, by Rachel Wallis, Director of International Protocol Services for the City of Dallas
- Independent research on Japan and Sendai, led by chaperone Tim Jones
- Cultural lessons, by chaperone Chrystal Sanders
- Lecture and language lesson, by Mihoko Ishikawa, JASDFW Education Coordinator
- TOMODACHI orientation via Skype, by Mya Fischer of the U.S.-Japan Council
- Lunch and learn discussions with JASDFW President Elaine Browning and Mark Berry, Dallas-Sendai Committee Chair
- Election of two student leaders by the group
- Planning of group presentations to share Texas culture in Sendai

Students were encouraged to take ownership by developing a theme, assuming leadership roles, and contributing to the group presentations. Group presentation discussions were student led and moderated by the chaperones. As students shared ideas for a theme, the concept that emerged was “Diversity and Oneness,” reflecting their diverse backgrounds but shared similarities. Their hope was...
that this message would resonate with the Japanese students - that each has a place in today’s global society. The students’ theme fostered their identity as a team. Each was encouraged to believe that his/her unique talents and traits added to the overall success of the group.

Activities and Experiences in Japan
The Young Ambassadors participated in three days of organized group outings, followed by activities with host families on Saturday. The main objectives were to provide opportunities for meaningful interactions in Sendai, promote cultural understanding, and build enduring relationships.

Day 1: Travel Dallas-to-Sendai
The Young Ambassadors departed Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport on June 30 and arrived at Narita Airport on July 1. At DFW, they received VIP treatment from American Airlines, including a special tour of the Admirals Club lounge. Upon their arrival at Narita, the group was interviewed by the popular Japanese TV show, you wa nani shini Nihon e? The group was then accompanied by American Airlines staff to Tokyo Station where they departed for Sendai by the Super Express. They were warmly greeted at Sendai Station by Sendai City representatives, Sendai International Relations Association (SIRA) staff, and the host families. Then they departed for their homestays to relax and get acquainted before three action-filled days.

Day 2: City Hall & Seiryo Secondary School
On their first morning in Sendai, the students assumed their ambassadorial roles with a courtesy visit to City Hall and a meeting with Mayor Emiko Okuyama. SIRA staff and other city officials joined in the City Hall welcome. The Dallas group hand-delivered a letter from Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings to Mayor Okuyama. Student leader Esmeralda Alejo of Dallas spoke briefly and presented a gift t-shirt. The Mayor immediately donned it and became an honorary member of the group. The students then toured City Hall, and several were interviewed for the local Tohoku TV news.
Next, the Dallas students had a valuable opportunity to interact with their Japanese peers at Seiryo Secondary School. They were greeted by the Principal, Vice Principal, Head of Teachers, and a JET Program ALT and were given a tour of the school. Then they split into four groups to attend different classes and join in classroom activities. For example, students in the English class learned yosakoi dance alongside their new Japanese friends. All the students ate lunch in the school cafeteria and participated in the tea ceremony club. In the afternoon, the Young Ambassadors gave their presentation on “Diversity/Oneness” to approximately 300 fifth year students and their teachers. Each student presented one slide about his or her life and held an object that was meaningful to his/her identity, and leader Esmeralda closed with comments about how everyone is unique but similar.

Day 3: Disaster Area & Matsushima
On their third day in Japan, the students learned about the impact of the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami and Sendai’s continuing recovery from the disaster. This eye-opening day began with a bus tour through the coastal area affected by the earthquake and tsunami. Three Sendai youth from the 2013 Young Ambassadors program joined the group. A host family in the affected Gamou area welcomed the students to their home. They served refreshments prepared by family friends and shared a moving account of the family’s experience of the tsunami. Students remarked how they gained new perspective on what had previously just been “images on the news.”

Next, the group paid a friendly visit to Mori-no-Sato, an elder care facility that was badly damaged by the 2011 tsunami. This facility is undergoing reconstruction with partial support from the Sendai Relief Fund raised by JASDFW in 2011-2012 ($189,000). JASDFW has established an ongoing friendship with residents and staff. The Young Ambassadors toured the facilities and entertained the residents with the songs “Deep in the Heart of Texas” and “Sakura”.

The group finished the afternoon with an excursion among the pine islands of Matsushima, ranked as one of Japan’s “three most scenic views.” For many of these students, the bay cruise was their first experience on a boat. They also had time for some fun with the Sendai boys (2013 Young Ambassadors) who had joined them for the day. On the return trip to Sendai, the students reflected on what they had seen and heard – each sharing one new experience and their appreciation for the day.

“I would share my experience at the disaster area and the Mori-No-Sato Retirement Home because I was allowed to get a firsthand experience of obstacles to Japanese progress while also given a sense of hope for the future. I was deeply and emotionally impacted by the experience.” – Vernon Johnson
Day 4: Sendai Highlights & Tohoku University

On their fourth day in Japan, the students experienced Sendai’s historic sites and its renowned Tohoku University and interacted with Young Ambassador alums from Sendai. They were joined on this outing by five of the 2013 Young Ambassadors from Sendai who took time off from school to be “ambassador hosts” to their new Dallas friends. Moreover, their tour leader at Tohoku University was Nanako Nakano, a Tohoku University student who had visited Dallas as a Young Ambassador in 2009.

At Tohoku University, the students learned about the school’s excellent math and science programs and opportunities to study abroad. They also enjoyed impromptu sports in the gym with Tohoku students – basketball, volleyball, and badminton.

The group toured the Sendai International Center, Sendai City Museum, and the site of Aoba Castle, where they happened to meet three characters from the DateBusyotai actors group. At the Kamei Museum, the group was greeted personally by Mr. Shogo Kamei, Chairman of the Tohoku Japan-America Association and long-time friend to Dallas, who presented each member of the group with a Sendai kokeshi doll. The group enjoyed a walk through the Jyozenji arcade to their final destination, the Sendai Mediathique library, where the library director gave a lecture on the unique architecture of this innovative structure.

“One experience that really stands out is just being with the Japanese young ambassadors of 2013. Every moment with them was precious and I believe we will be friends forever.” – Esmeralda Alejo

Day 5: Host Family Activities & Farewell Party

The Young Ambassadors spent evenings and Saturday bonding with their host families and experiencing daily life with family and friends. Activities included visiting an onsen, trips to various temples, shopping at a local bookstore, wearing yukata and jinbei, cooking, shopping, and more. On the last evening, SIRA
hosted a “sayonara party” attended by the Dallas delegation, host families, Tohoku Japan America Association members, Sendai Kite Club, and City officials. This was an occasion for the Dallas students to share their own culture and express appreciation to their new Sendai friends. The Dallas Young Ambassadors gave their group presentation on “Diversity/Oneness” and distributed snacks and small gifts to the guests. The evening concluded with everyone lighting fireworks.

“My family came to the US from Mexico, and my host mother participated in a program about home staying. My host mother stayed in Mexico with a host family, so not only did she teach me about Japanese culture, but we were able to share our love of Mexican culture. Every day, my host mother tried her best to not only speak English with me, but Spanish too. – Neyva Hernandez

“The one day that stands out is the farewell party because that’s when we realized that the moments together were precious. And the fireworks were beautiful.” – Esmeralda Alejo

Day 6: Travel Sendai-to-Tokyo & Miraikan
Both students and hosts shed tears as they made their final farewells on Sunday morning. Host families accompanied the group to the Super Express platform and ran beside the train as it left the station.

In Tokyo the group toured the Miraikan, the National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation. The students were especially fascinated by the displays on quantum computing and robotics. The group stayed overnight at the National Olympic Memorial Youth Center.

“Every student and citizen in Dallas should experience this rich and highly efficient culture; the US has a lot to learn from Japan’s energy-efficient methods.” – Sameer Khoja
**Day 7: U.S. Embassy & Return Tokyo-to-Dallas**

A unique highlight of the week was a visit to the U.S. Embassy, specially arranged by TOMODACHI staff. There the Young Ambassadors met with Embassy staff and representatives of Mitsubishi and Hitachi, TOMODACHI supporters. The Young Ambassadors shared a review of their experiences in Sendai and a personal message of friendship using the letters in the word “TOMODACHI.” Two Embassy interns gave a presentation on the “TOMODACHI Generation” and encouraged students to stay involved. The Embassy visit conveyed the significance of the U.S.-Japan friendship and the important role each student can play in nurturing the relationship.

After one final meal in Japan, the group returned to Narita International Airport. Akio Hosono, the General Manager of the airport, personally assisted each student with check-in. They once again received VIP treatment, including special AA/TOMODACHI teddy bears and a group photo with the flight crew.

“I would tell everyone who helped make this program possible that I am so thankful and that I strongly hope that they continue this program because it was so life-changing for me for the better.” - Pauline Speegle

**Post-trip Activities**

JASDFW held a one-month reunion for the Young Ambassadors and their families on August 10 at the home of Mark Berry, Chairman of the Dallas/Sendai Committee. They shared their homestay experiences and reprised their “TOMODACHI” message for the families, JASDFW staff, Honorary Consul-General of Japan, and local representatives of Hitachi and Toyota, supporters of the TOMODACHI exchange fund.
On August 14, most of the Young Ambassadors attended Japan America Friendship Night at the Texas Rangers ballpark. The pre-game ceremony highlighted Texas-Japan youth exchange programs. Six of the Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors participated as flag bearers alongside exchange students from Fort Worth and Nagaoka. Consul-General Nozomu Takaoka from Houston threw the first pitch.

Impact on Students / Survey Summary
Survey results reflected an overwhelmingly positive response to the program this year. As a result of their experience on the program, everyone agreed that they felt more confident, more willing to challenge themselves in the future and more open to others’ perspectives. There was also a consensus that everyone better understood their own cultural values, identity and background, and also better understood the history and culture of Japan. The majority of participants indicated a serious interest in studying Japanese in their future, as well as a stronger motivation to study or work abroad, and everyone indicated that they were inspired to make an impact in the world after this experience.

Although the results were positive in every aspect of the survey, the participants were most enthusiastic about the personal connections that were made during the program. Asked about their best experiences, the majority of responses told of the friendships made with host families and Japanese students who participated in the reciprocal program in Dallas last year. The only suggestions for improvement were expanding funding to facilitate the participation of more Dallas area students or lengthening the trip. Not a single negative comment was recorded.

The 2014 Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors are youth of the highest caliber with bright futures ahead of them. They embraced their role as members of the TOMODACHI generation, and all expressed a desire to use this experience to contribute to Dallas-Sendai and Japan-U.S. friendships in the future. They are staying in touch with their host families via social media and email, and some have expressed interest in hosting Sendai students in Dallas in future years. JASDFW is maintaining regular communications with these students to engage them further in achieving our mission, and several have already volunteered at JASDFW events.

Significance to JASDFW
Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors is important to JASDFW because it is a mission driven program that changes lives. It supports a major goal of JASDFW’s strategic plan – to increase opportunities for North Texans to experience U.S.-Japan cross-cultural exchange. It also meets our objective to expand the breadth of the Dallas-Sendai relationship beyond JASDFW to other individuals and organizations. Moreover, the Young Ambassadors program cultivates youth of both countries as future stewards of the Dallas-Sendai relationship and the U.S.-Japan relationship.
JASDFW and SIRA will continue the Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors Program. The frequency will depend on funding, but both organizations would like to continue it annually in order to build and sustain relationships through reciprocal visits.

**Organization and Support**

Dallas-Sendai Young Ambassadors 2014 is part of the TOMODACHI NAJAS Exchange Program, which is made possible through generous contributions from Mitsubishi Corporation, Toyota Motor Corporation, and Hitachi, Ltd.

The program was organized and administered in Dallas by the Japan-America Society of Dallas/Fort Worth (JASDFW): JASDFW Executive Director Anna McFarland; Membership & Communications Coordinator Chrystal Sanders; Program Assistant Molly Lam, Board member Mark Berry, chair of the Dallas-Sendai Committee; and educator Timothy C. Jones. JASDFW recruited and selected participants, prepared the students, made travel arrangements, provided chaperones, and managed the budget.

In Sendai, the program was managed by the Sendai International Relations Association (SIRA): Rei Sato and Nobuko Sudo, General Affairs and Planning Section. SIRA planned the itinerary, activities, ground transportation, host family and hotel accommodations, and meals, and managed the local budget.

The City of Dallas Protocol Office and City of Sendai International Section also provided valuable assistance and support.

The World Affairs Council of Dallas/Fort Worth recruited applicants by publicizing the program to Dallas area high schools.

American Airlines employees provided valuable assistance at both DFW and Narita International Airports.

**Attachments**

- Participant Testimonials
- Participant Bios
- Itinerary
- Promotional Flyer
- Applicant Summary
- Seiryo Secondary School Article
- Travel Booklet
- Group Presentation PowerPoint – Diversity/Oneness
- Photos (sent separately with preliminary report)