Tomodachi/NAJAS
Youth Baseball Exchange
July 31 - August 9, 2014
Ofunato, Iwate, Japan
Executive Summary

The Japan Society of San Diego and Tijuana (JSSDT) was privileged to take a group of middle school baseball players to Ofunato, Iwate, Japan in August of 2014 as part of the TOMODACHI/NAJAS Grassroots Exchange Initiative (TOMODACHI).

TOMODACHI received major financial support from the Toyota Motor Corporation, Mitsubishi Corporation and Hitachi Ltd. Littler Mendelson P.C., Kyocera International, Inc., the U.S.-Japan Council, the U.S. Department of State, the National Association of Japan-America Societies, the San Diego Padres, the Rakuten Eagles, the City of Ofunato, and the City of San Diego also provided financial and/or logistical support.

In Year 2 of TOMODACHI, ten San Diego baseball players were selected to participate in the exchange by the JSSDT, most of whom (eight of ten) were repeat players/host family members from Year 1 in San Diego. The first two nights were spent in hotels at Narita Airport and in Sendai. Our Sendai visit included a tour of the Rakuten Eagles stadium, meeting Eagles players on the field, and watching the Eagles/Seibu Lions game. It was a great day thanks to the hospitality of Eagles staff. The two hotel nights also gave our young men a chance to rest after the long flight and get ready for their week in Ofunato.

San Diego players stayed in pairs with five host families for the duration of their stay in Ofunato. The host family experiences and the cultural activities organized by our Ofunato hosts were by far the most important and memorable aspects of the program. Most of these were organized exclusively for San Diego players and included a beach cleanup community service project, a visit to a local middle school to hear a presentation about their 3/11 experiences, tours of Rikuzentakata and Ofunato Bay, BBQ parties with Japanese players and host families, and the Tanabata Festival.

After setting our dates for the exchange, we learned that a separate group had organized a baseball camp in Ofunato on exactly the same dates. In speaking with leaders of that group and our colleagues in Ofunato, we all agreed that having San Diego players participate in the baseball camp, rather than asking Ofunato to conduct a separate baseball program just for us, made the most sense. The baseball camp featured Bobby Valentine, a former professional baseball player and manager, and a group of his players from Connecticut. Participating in clinics with Bobby V was a great opportunity for our players. After four days of clinics and scrimmages, mixed teams of Japanese and Americans played in a round-robin tournament. Other than baseball activities during the day, San Diego and Connecticut players had different schedules and saw each other only at the BBQ parties. San Diego players were fortunate to be able to live with host families and spend significant time with their Ofunato friends.

The second year of TOMODACHI was a great success, with players from both countries making new friends and learning about each other’s customs and lifestyles while competing in baseball, a sport so popular and important to the traditions and histories of both the United States and Japan. We look forward to continuing the successes of this important program in 2015 in San Diego and in 2016 in Ofunato.
Good morning from Sendai,

Yesterday was a busy day! We took the Shinkansen (bullet train) to Sendai after breakfast. For the most part the boys looked rested and were ready to go. The trip from Narita to Sendai took just a little over 3 hours. Before boarding the train the boys picked up bentos or other lunch items for the train ride.

Coach Sato-san (from last year's exchange) greeted us at the train station and will be accompanying us along with Coach Aki-san for the remainder of the trip. They have been very gracious hosts and very helpful with the kids.

We toured the Rakuten Eagles stadium and met a few American players, including Andruw Jones. The Eagles gave us jerseys and hats, which we wore to the game last night. They boys also recorded a pre game message for the Eagles which was played on the big screen. Unfortunately we weren't back in time to see it play. Andrew Bialock was our designated team spokesman. He did a great job!

Once again the boys were open to trying new things last night. Without knowing, a couple tried "beef" on a stick, which was actually tongue. There was no indication that it wasn't anything but tasty! Other's enjoyed KFC, yakitori chicken, and snacks that they brought with them. Coca Cola is still a fan favorite of these kids.

A 7th inning stretch at an Eagles game consists of large colorful balloons being released after the visiting team makes their 3rd out. Once the song (whether its take me out to the ball game - Japanese version, or fight song...I don't know) is completed the balloons are released into the air all at once. It's quite a sight. What's more incredible, is there are virtually no balloons on the field afterward. They are very efficient with the clean up.

I'm conducting interviews of the boys, to help provide Dave with information for his report. I'm finding that your kids all have unique interests and expectations about this trip. So far, the five kids I've interviewed are open to try and experience new things. What a great bunch of kids.

This morning we will travel by bus to Ofunato. Once there the boys will be introduced to the rest of the baseball camp participants, which include 20 Japanese players, 20 US (East Coast) players, and our 10 boys. This evening there will be a welcome party as well.

Other than a few tired boys, they are all doing very well. I hope after an early night and some rest they will be ready to go play some ball.
Monday 8/4

Greetings from Ofunato,

Wow! What a day yesterday was. I hope you're prepared for a long update! We started with a 2-2 1/2 hour bus drive from Sendai to Ofunato. We stopped about half way for a bathroom and snack break. I'm pleased to say that we were able to share some more new foods with some of the boys...and no, nothing as exotic as tongue. So far, nobody who has tried any of the new foods has not spit it out or gotten sick. I call that progress!

From the bus, the boys were able to see areas where the 3/11 tsunami. Although it's been roughly 3 years, there is still a lot of evidence of the devastation that came through the cities of Kesennuma, Rikuzentakata, and Ofunato. In many cases you can see where the water levels rose to, by the markings on what's left of the buildings. They saw sites where schools once sat and are now only lots of dirt. I'm sure that they will share their own impressions and thoughts about what they say.

We arrived to our destination in Ofunato where the boys were greeted by the Chairman of the Board of Education, members of the host families and representatives from the Bobby Valentine Baseball Camp. Connor was chosen as our player to speak on behalf of the team, and with about 15 minutes to prepare he gave an outstanding speech. He thanked our hosts, expressed his sympathy to the people of Ofunato for their hardships caused by 3/11, shared what he is looking forward to during our stay, and expressed his thanks and heartfelt gratitude to our hosts. The speeches were followed by introductions to the host families, a few which had kids stay in San Diego last summer. Bento lunch followed, then off to the field.
Upon arrival at the field, the boys got off the bus and were greeted personally by Bobby Valentine with warm welcomes and a firm handshake.

While awaiting further instruction a couple of our boys, I believe it was Kevin and Jonathan (sorry if I got that wrong) took the lead and gathered our boys to go meet their Japanese counterparts. What a great sight to see them shake hands and begin the relationships with those who will be their teammates throughout the camp. We watched warm-ups for about 1/2 hour before we left to check into our hotel. With perfect timing, we returned just in time to watch our boys wrap up batting practice. They looked pretty good out there.

What followed next can only be described as the most incredible display of graciousness I've experienced. The welcome dinner was out of this world! After about a 30 minute drive, we arrived at a seafood processing plant on the waterfront where they were awaiting our arrival. There were at least 20+ volunteers preparing a feast which included scallops, fresh out of the water - and these scallops were from shells the size of my hand, with scallops the size of my palm, and about 1 inch thick - yakitori chicken, curry rice, grilled beef, grilled pork, and other foods I'm sure I'm forgetting. It was an unbelievable spread!
Speeches were made by the Mayor of Ofunato, Bobby Valentine, and the Chairman of the Board of Education, all with the hopes of making this a most enjoyable experience for all, and the continuation of this program, and others like ours. They left with their host families for the night, after a brief meeting where each asked their players what they liked to eat and preferred for breakfast. Once again, they truly go out of their way to be the best hosts that they possibly can.

I'm not going to go into much more detail, as I think you need to hear the experiences through your own boy’s words. I believe they will have many words to describe what they’ve experienced thus far. I will of course continue to update about the times that we have together, but while they are at camp, there may not be too much for me to share. I will highlight as appropriate.

**Tuesday 8/5 – Coaches’ Edition**

**The Veterans**

**Most Likely to Run the Japan Society - Chris Alexander**
Chris has stated that he would like to be a part of Japan Society activities in the future. As a seasoned veteran, Chris appears to be scheming to take over to take over the exchange program and we look forward to his service on the Japan Society's board of directors. Here is a quote from his most impressive interview with Kathy about what he hopes to gain from this year's trip:
"I'd like to be a little humbled and appreciate what I have and learn more about the Japanese culture and the differences in the structure of their society compared to the U.S."

**Most Talented - Andrew Bialock**
Andrew's on-camera performance before the Rakuten Eagles game was, as always, spot on. He's a natural in front of a microphone, not an "er" or an "um" was heard. Andrew's gears are always turning, he even carried on engaging and intelligent conversations during the one-hour passport line at Narita Airport while the rest of the room was sweaty and miserable. While we did see "celebrities" at LAX, we'll take Andrew any day.

**Changed the Most Since 9th Grade - Evan Earl**
What a difference two years has made. Evan had a few difficult moments in 2012, he is an absolute joy to be around in 2014 and has fully embraced this year's experience. You as parents watch your sons grow up in small steps, we as coaches only see the quantum leaps. Evan has leapt.

**Class Clown - Jonathan Engle**
After our first practice with Bobby V's kids and the Japanese players, which produced maybe more than our fair share of whiffs and errors, Jonathan returned to where we were sitting to announce with a big smile, "They think we suck." While that may or may not be true and you probably had to be there, it was hilarious. Jonathan's sense of humor has been a very pleasant surprise, even when he's doing his summer reading (we were not paid to write this).

**Valedictorian – Connor Ferrell**
As we arrived in Ofunato for our Welcome Ceremony, we were asked to have a player make a short speech. With no advance warning, Connor not only said all the right things, he said them in the right order, expressing his regret for the events of 3/11/2011, thanking the City of Ofunato and host families for their gracious hospitality, and saying how much he looked forward to learning about Japanese culture, food, and language. Baseball was mentioned last, as it should have been. Well done.
Most Likely to Succeed - Nicholas Liong
We promise not to do this but we are tempted to just drop Nicholas off on the side of the road somewhere and tell him to meet us at the airport next Saturday. We have no doubt that he would make it. A major goal of this program is to create future ambassadors of goodwill between Japan and the U.S., Nicholas should consider career opportunities here someday.

The Rookies
Most Outgoing - Kevin Covarrubias
Just before the first practice with the Japanese players, the groups were sitting apart, clearly a bit awkward about interacting with each other. Kevin broke the ice, walking right into the group of Japanese players and introducing himself. The rest of our boys then jumped right in too but it was Kevin who led by example. It's always best when that happens without coaches/parents making it happen.

Best Personality - Adam Lovato
"Mr. Roboto" hasn't stopped smiling (or talking) since we left. He has a knack for being right in the middle of everything and his energy and enthusiasm are infectious. We can't imagine what it's like to be in the same room with Adam and Luke, they must be carrying on conversations in their sleep.

Most Mature - James Reece
We have left James in charge of the rest of the trip. He has all the passports & JR passes (adults included) and will be making arrangements for our bus and bullet train rides back to Tokyo. When asked if he "whups up" on his little brother when he gets out of line, his response was "No, but SOMEONE should!" Please return any extra Japanese yen that he brings home, he is in charge of all funds from here on out.

Most Inquisitive - Luke Reece
This is what we love to see when we bring your sons to Japan for the first time. Luke is taking full advantage of this learning opportunity and if we don't get a photo of Luke with his eyes and mouth wide open, it won't be for lack of opportunities. He is one of the best examples of how programs like this change lives in positive and significant ways.

We admit that we are biased, but this trip has been better than we could have hoped for so far. Your young men have been absolutely great ambassadors and we're all looking forward to rest of the week.

Best,
Mark & Dave
Tuesday 8/5

Good Morning All,

Yesterday was once again a pretty busy day for all of us. The boys had a full day of baseball with drills in the morning, and scrimmage in the afternoon. They have now been divided into their teams, which include a mixture of the Japanese kids and East Coast US kids.

Keiko and I accompanied the kids, Connor, Chris, Luke, and Adam, the first of our guys to do their volunteer community service. They were taken to one of the local beach areas where the tsunami hit and listened to one of the fisherman's account of the 3/11 events as he remembers it. After that, they all were put on trash duty. Gloves and bags were distributed and they were asked to pick up bottles, plastic, burnable items, and pretty much anything that isn't natural or organic to the local beaches. Although there wasn't a lot of visible trash, they managed to do a fairly good job of filling their bags. Once they finished their task they were allowed to play in the water for a few minutes before returning to the field.

Once we returned to the field we managed to catch a little of the action going on. As the boys were in their new team jerseys, I had a hard time knowing who was who. I did manage to recognize a few players which include Nick in left field, making some great catches for the white team. I also recognized Evan on the blue team. Unfortunately, I watched him get drilled by a ball thrown by the catcher trying to make a play at third base. No harm done, Evan had a smile on his face as he ran down to first base, and play continued. Evan is one of the kids who has had a smile on his face, along with Adam, and Luke every time I look up to check things out. They all are representing Tierrasanta very well!

After the game we made a trip to Rikuzentakata, an area which was devastated and basically wiped out by the tsunami. Although the boys were singing and laughing it up on the way over, they were brought back to reality when we stepped off the bus. Please ask them about their experience here, as they were very inquisitive and Coach Dave answered all of their questions as best as he could. The area is very intriguing as they are in the rebuilding stages, however in order to do this they need to raise the level of the ground significantly. So what other way to do this than literally moving a mountain. They have erected a very elaborate excavating project which moves dirt from the mountain to the lower ground. There's more to tell about this area, but I encourage you to hear it from your boys, as I believe they were all moved by what they saw.
From there, they were joined by their host families for the night.

I'm running short on time this morning, but will send pictures from today a little later.

Your young men are doing great!

**Wednesday 8/6**

Today was another busy day, which included more baseball/scrimmages and another round of volunteer/community service work. Today's volunteers were Jonathan, Kevin, and Nick. Again, I think that you'll want to ask them about the gentlemen who spoke, but I'll provide the very brief readers digest version. Another local fisherman told us his account of what happened on 3/11. After the earthquake he moved his family to higher ground, and left his home. With his boat as his livelihood, he decided to save that over his home, and headed out to sea, and rode out the tsunami from a safe distance, as did many other small boats in the area. He's also a part of a diving group which helped with the underwater cleanup efforts. After hearing the stories we were asked to pick up trash in a different area than yesterday. Some very interesting items were picked up, and once again things that you could tell had one time been someone’s personal precious items.

Unfortunately, the baseball didn't run as long as it did yesterday, and we returned from the service work just as the players were shaking hands. Sorry...you'll have to ask the boys how that went!
From there we walked up to the local elementary school and met some junior high school students who made a wonderful presentation about how they were affected by the tsunami. Following their presentation there was a brief question and answer session. Our boys asked some very good questions. Somehow, things became a little strange after that, and who's got talent became a theme. Our boys sang for the students...yes, you read that right, they sang! Of course the Ofunato students responded with their school song, and we (the adults) were very impressed with how well they sang, but mostly with their ability to use more than one note...unlike our “talented” singers! Kevin wrapped up our little talent show with a stellar display of juggling. Way to go boys!! Very special thanks to Keiko for translating their stories to us. We all certainly appreciate all of the translating she does for us from day to day.

After that, the boys were turned back over to their home stay families. They all seem to be doing very well.

I'm sure today will be packed with more fun and adventures.

**Thursday 8/7**

Sadly we are edging closer and closer to the end of our trip. Today began with a moment of silence. A siren sounded throughout the country commemorating the exact time that the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Your boys observed this moment with silent respect. Then...off to the field again.

The day, like all others, consisted of morning drills and a scrimmage game after lunch. Today we (Keiko and I) skipped the afternoon volunteer/community service project to spend some time with friends visiting from Oshima Island, another area off of the coast of Kesennuma, which was affected greatly by the tsunami. Reiko and her son Wataru were a part of a group of students that traveled to San Diego in 2012 as a part of the TOMODACHI Initiative to give thanks to our local military that provided relief support immediately following the earthquake/tsunami. It was nice to see them both and see how well they are doing.

During the afternoon the boys played their scrimmage game and represented San Diego very well. Both offensively and defensively the boys were outstanding. Adam was awesome in left field hustling and making some pretty great plays for the white team. Chris had a solid hit up the middle for a single, Nick hit a bomb for a base hit, that ended up as a triple due to his good hustle. James did a great job behind the plate as well as at bat. Luke made some solid contact and good plays at second. We heckled the boys a bit from behind the fence, did the wave, and reminded them that they're not supposed to acknowledge and respond to the fans while in the field. When will they learn. Andrew and Evan took part in the volunteer work, but I'm not sure what they did. I was told that it was not going to be as glamorous as picking up trash, but all I heard is that they got to go swimming from Andrew. Given the extremely warm temperatures, that's the kind of volunteer work I would want to do!!

I must say, the bus rides provide the highlight of my day. The chatter from the boys, even after 6 hours or so in the heat, they are still full of energy and enthusiasm, and they say some pretty funny stuff! The quote of the day today was, "hey, we have a urinal in our house"...which came from the very excited Luke Reece. We (the adults) got a pretty good laugh out of that. Not so much about the fact that his host family has a urinal in their house...but the mere fact that Luke was so excited that he felt the need to share with us all.

The coaches took the boys out for a boating trip following their baseball day. I wasn't there (I needed a little bit of down time) but I hear that it was a fabulous trip. I only got a few details...
from our coaches, so I suggest you ask the boys about the trip. I hear that they did see a boat in the bay/harbor area that was 150 years old that survived the tsunami. But, that's about all I heard.

Today begins the start of the "tournament" phase of the week. The teams have been divided up and they will play a total of 10 games over the next two days...or at least that's my understanding. It's going to be a couple of long days, but these boys have been troopers enduring the long days and heat.

**Thursday 8/7 Evening**

Let the baseball games begin! Today was the first day of the "tournament". The boys were divided into three teams playing in two locations. Coach Mark and Dave covered the boys on team A and B. Keiko and I were in charge of team C, which consisted of Evan, James, Kevin and Nick. As we got off of the bus and met up with the other members of the team, I heard one of the East Coast kids say "we're gonna win this." It was nice to hear that vote of confidence from one of the other teammates!

In game one today, all of the boys did very well. I saw some good hits, base running (even a few stolen bases) and excellent fielding. All of that added up to a win over the Kesennuma team. I believe the final score was 5-3.

Game two started out with a bang. I believe we scored six runs in the first inning. Once again, the boys represented Tierrasanta with some excellent baseball. I must say, I need to get Kevin's host mother's secret for getting his clothes so clean after a day of baseball. There's more dirt on his uniform than there is on the field!!! 😊

Since I don't have a clear update of how the other two teams did you might want to ask the boys how their games went.
We will be attending the Tanabata Festival this evening, which will be a very unique and fun experience for your boys! There's rain in the forecast, and we see it coming. Actually, we just saw lightning and heard the thunder... hopefully this evening's event isn't spoiled by rain.

I'll be sending my final update in the morning. I'll also try to get more photos transferred from the cameras and send a few more as well. Not to worry though, I will share all of the photos with you all when we reconnect back in San Diego.

**Friday 8/8 – Final Edition**

Today will be my final update as we will be having a full day of baseball and attending a farewell party tonight.

Last night, following a very brief rain shower, we headed out to the Tanabata Matsuri festival which is celebrated on the 7th of July or August, depending on the area. If you Google Tanabata Matsuri, you can have a more accurate description of the meaning of the celebration than I could possibly give you. There were a lot of decorations in the street and several floats which the boys got to help pull through the streets. Given how narrow the streets, it's quite a task when they have to pass by each other. One float will move as far to the side as possible, leaving only inches between them as the other is pulled carefully along. There are also people perched on top of the floats with bamboo sticks that move tree branches out of the way so that nothing interferes with the floats passage.

It was a great time, and the kids were truly rock stars. One of the kids (I can't recall who) said, "now we know how the Kardashians feel." They were stopped on the street with requests for pictures from a lot of people. Your boys ate it all up. It was hard to get them to the bus to leave at the end of the evening. There was a lot of food, but churros seemed to be the hot ticket item. So much so that they ran out of them due to the huge amount all of the boys consumed. When I say all, I'm also including the other US baseball players. I think the boys will have plenty to tell you about this festival as they all had smiles from ear to ear last night. Their host families met us there and took them home for the night.

We're heading out shortly for the last day of baseball. I'm not sure what the team records are, as the rain may have canceled a game yesterday afternoon, but team C which I reported about yesterday is 2-0. Good luck to all of the players today!

We'll be starting the journey back tomorrow morning. It's been a great trip and your boys will have SO MUCH to share with you!
Friday 8/8 – Final Final Edition
Let the baseball games continue!

Today was the second and last day of the "tournament". Team C (Evan, James, Kevin, Nicholas) finished the tournament undefeated and “champions.” Team A (Chris, Jonathan) and Team B (Adam, Andrew, Connor, Luke) also acquitted themselves well and won their fair share of games.

We attended a farewell BBQ in the evening, again featuring enormous scallops and delicious yakiniku. I can’t say enough about how well your young men did this week and it was great to watch them talk with their new friends from Ofunato and Connecticut at the party. The host families took everyone home at around 8:30pm and I’m sure there will be tears tomorrow morning when we depart.