

NARRATIVE REPORT

The New Orleans-Matsue TOMODACHI Exchange Program (Exchange) was born at the November 2013 Annual Meeting of the Japan Society of New Orleans (JSNO) when the Honorary Consul General of Japan to New Orleans Donna Fraiche and New Orleans Tourism and Marketing Corporation (NOTMC) CEO Mark Romig spoke about the October 2013 Official Visit made by the City of New Orleans to Matsue. The support of Ms. Fraiche and Mr. Romig, as well as the upcoming 20th anniversary of the Sister City relationship between the two cities, motivated JSNO leaders to apply for this grant.

EXCHANGE PROGRAM ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The Exchange activities centered around the unique history of New Orleans, the origins of Jazz, and Lafcadio Hearn's time in New Orleans. JSNO invited the Matsue Official Delegates, who were accompanying the Participants, to join in these activities.

Due to the Exchange's emphasis on Jazz, JSNO arranged for the Participants to arrive a day earlier than originally scheduled in order to attend Satchmo Fest, celebrating the life of Louis Armstrong. Sunday, the Participants' first day in New Orleans, began with a Jazz Mass at St. Augustine Church, a historical black church, followed by second-lining to the festival, where they enjoyed live music. The Participants were an outgoing group and throughout the day, they stopped to talk and take photos with locals. Both on this day and at other music-centered events, locals were interested and amazed to learn about the popularity of Jazz in Japan.

On Monday, the Participants visited New Orleans City Hall, where they met with the Mayor's Chief of Staff, Brooke Smith, and City Councilpersons. They next met with the heads of the Historic New Orleans Collection, Priscilla and John Lawrence, who went to Matsue on the New Orleans Official Visit. The Lawrence's were overwhelmed by the warm welcome they had received in Matsue and were eager to reciprocate, giving the Participants a history lesson and hosting a reception in their honor. This type of reciprocity, based in a sincere desire to give back, exemplifies the benefits of the Exchange.

Monday concluded with an Opening Reception hosted by Honorary Consul General Donna Fraiche and her husband, Dr. John Fraiche. Various dignitaries including Consul Saori Nagase of the Consulate General of Japan at Nashville, TN, Ron Markham, CEO of the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, Nell Nolan of *The New Orleans Advocate* and leaders in the local Japanese community were in attendance.

A glowing article about this event was published in *The New Orleans Advocate*:

<http://www.theneworleansadvocate.com/features/10037554-171/nell-nolan-golden-gatherings>

Tuesday focused on the common ground between New Orleans and Matsue with the study of Lafcadio Hearn. Hearn, a prolific writer, lived in both New Orleans and Matsue and is the common bond that led to the New Orleans-Matsue Sister City relationship.

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The Participants visited Hearn's former residence, currently a private home owned by Dr. Richard Scribner, who generously invited the group to tour and even made the Participants miso soup. The Participants also viewed the Hearn Collection at Tulane University. Other activities included tours of Mardi Gras World and the Lower Garden District.

Highlights from Wednesday included breakfast at Cafe Du Monde; a visit to New Orleans' community radio station, WWOZ, where the Participants were showered with gifts to use at Matsue's Little Mardi Gras; lunch at Palace Cafe with table-side greetings, gifts, and a cooking lesson from the Executive Chef; and a private tour of Yakumo Nihon Teien, a Japanese Garden for New Orleans, led by its founder, Dr. Jack Strong, and his wife Mihoko.

Thursday included more history with visits to Armstrong Park, where slaves gathered and created the roots of the music we know as Jazz, the Backstreet Cultural Museum, and the Treme neighborhood. The Participants also volunteered at ARC, a nonprofit serving people with intellectual disabilities. The Participants worked with the disabled to sort donated Mardi Gras beads, which are sold back to the community to raise money to support ARC's operations. The Participants ended the night by gathering for Zydeco music, food, and bowling at Rock 'n' Bowl, a legendary music club.

The goal for Friday was for the Participants to see some of the areas surrounding New Orleans. Their day included a swamp tour, where they saw many alligators; a visit to the Houma Indian Community Center to learn about local Native American culture; and a visit to Southdown Plantation. After some rest, the Participants met on Frenchman Street, home to many well-known music clubs and an art market featuring local artists.

Saturday was a free day for the Participants to spend with their host families.

The Exchange closed on Sunday evening a BBQ party at Mike and Bonnie Turner's home with Participants, the Official Delegation, host families, and members of the Exchange Program Committee.

The Exchange had a tremendous impact on the community at large, the Participants and on the various local Japanese groups, engaging the following:

- 7 Participants and 1 Chaperone from Matsue
- 3 Official Delegates from Matsue
- 5 Leaders from the City of New Orleans
- 30 Members of the Steering Committee and Sub-Committees
- 14 Host Family Members;
- Over 50 Members of JSNO, Japan Club of New Orleans, Japan Garden Foundation, and jetaaNOLA, who attended various events and interacted with participants;

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- Over 35 Members of the community, who provided services to the Participants; (a number of these contributors are now members of JSNO).

We believe this Exchange had a significant impact of the Participants. Prior to coming to New Orleans, several of the Participants did not belong to the Matsue New Orleans Club, but all of them are now actively engaged in the club. The Exchange opened the eyes of many locals about Japan, and in turn, the Participants gained a true appreciation for New Orleans.

The Exchange energized JSNO leaders and members in a way not seen in years. Website visits, Facebook engagement, and membership have all increased since the Exchange. The Participants are in touch with their host families and various JSNO members. In addition, several participants forged professional relationships, which continue to grow.

The Exchange presented a once in a lifetime opportunity for the US and Japan. The Participants were able to have experiences and meet people they would not have if they were just tourist visiting New Orleans. Correspondingly, the local volunteers involved with the Exchange had the opportunity to literally change the lives of the participants.

The Exchange helped to significantly deepen the bonds between Matsue and New Orleans, and the Sister City relationship is the strongest it has been since its inception in 1994. Matsue is very excited to host their New Orleans counterparts in 2015. This Exchange not only facilitated an opportunity for citizens of each city to get to know each other, but also helped to solidify the official relationship between the city government.

EXCHANGE PROGRAM OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

The Exchange accomplished all that JSNO set out to do, including educating the Participants about New Orleans; sharing cultures on the person to person level; exploring our common bonds; changing the perceptions of locals and Participants; and energizing the Participants to be lifelong proponents of New Orleans and the US.

The closing BBQ offered meaningful insight into the Exchange's impact when the Participants offered unscripted closing remarks:

One Participant had researched home-stays beforehand and was concerned as he had read about unfavorable situations. Holding back tears, he then went on to say that he could not have been more pleased with the Exchange and his relationship with his host family.

Another participant, who had never even left her prefecture, was scared she would be approached by unsavory drug dealers with guns as soon as she got off the plane in the US based upon what she had seen in movies. She emotionally went on to express her

gratitude to the group and her host family for showing her a true picture of Americans, warm, friendly, and welcoming.

Another Participant commented he had not been sure what to expect upon arrival, but came to be deeply impressed by the significant time and effort that went into planning and executing the Exchange. He said he was committed to helping with the 2015 Exchange. He went on to explain that while few or none of the volunteers who had touched him would be able to visit Matsue during the 2015 Exchange, he was committed to passing along the kindness he had received to a new friend. His thoughts embody the spirit of TOMODACHI and brought all to tears.

One of the Participants is a chef in Matsue, and he explained that his main goal in visiting New Orleans was to learn how to properly make gumbo to serve in his restaurant. He went on to say that while he had learned some gumbo cooking techniques, what he was most inspired to do upon his return was to put the New Orleans heart and hospitality he had received into his gumbo.

By the time the final Participant spoke, all were very emotional. She choked out how touched she was by the friendship established between her and her host family. She started crying and said that she now considered them her second family and was sad to leave them. Like a protective mother, her host mom quickly sprang up and enveloped her in a big hug.

Thanks to the positive impact of the Exchange, JSNO gained over 20 new members, increasing its membership by 20%. The Exchange also helped to cement relationships and cooperation between the various local Japanese interest groups, earning JSNO praise from the Consul General of Japan at Nashville, Motohiko Kato, for bringing together the various Japanese groups in the New Orleans metro area.

JSNO is a small, all-volunteer Society with little corporate sponsorship, but the incredible enthusiasm and commitment of the volunteers enabled JSNO to host a successful Exchange. The time-intensive work of establishing a foundation for this Exchange has already been completed, so JSNO would very much like to continue hosting semi-annual exchanges. However, the number of hours required to hold a successful Exchange make it unlikely that JSNO could do so unless funding can be identified to cover both the Exchange and paid support staff. Positive momentum and institutional memory make holding semi-annual Exchanges ideal, but if this is not possible, JSNO will still seek to find ways to hold them periodically.

The JSNO leadership believes that the positive impact of the 2014 Exchange will be maintained through personal contact between friends, social media, and visits by individuals between Matsue and New Orleans. For example, Mike Turner, JSNO President, has already entertained visitors from Matsue introduced to him by the Participant he hosted. This precedent is sure to continue as more Matsue citizens visit New Orleans and vice-versa.

PARTNERS

JSNO viewed this Exchange as an opportunity to collaborate with other Japan-related organizations. Representatives from the Japan Club of New Orleans, the Japan Garden Foundation of New Orleans, jetaaNOLA, the Honorary Consul General of Japan's Office, NOTMC, Tulane University, University of New Orleans, and Loyola University joined members of JSNO to plan and execute the Exchange.

The Steering Committee, comprised of members from the organizations above, first met in February 2014 and members were assigned to lead the various sub-committees needed to plan and execute an Exchange. It was decided the Exchange Program Committee would have Day Coordinators, who would plan and execute each day's schedule.

NOTMC, led by Mark Romig, was instrumental in facilitating a successful Exchange. Their representative, Ann Marshall Thomas, provided invaluable staff support, and NOTMC also facilitated funding from the City of New Orleans to cover the Participants' transportation, valued at \$2000. This allowed JSNO to focus its funding on programs and receptions. NOTMC also provided the Participants access to high-level New Orleans officials.

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

Without a doubt, this was a tremendous experience for all involved, and JSNO was pleased with the remarks made in surveys completed by the Participants.

The initial challenge was whether JSNO and the New Orleans community was capable of putting on an Exchange of this nature. This was a first exchange for JSNO, so there was no history or institutional memory to reference. The overwhelming support JSNO received from the Steering Committee and the various Japanese organizations proved this challenge could be overcome.

Additionally, discussions with other local international organizations indicated that finding appropriate families for home-stays could be difficult. The length of the home stay (8 night) also presented a particular challenge in itself. Through networking and reaching out to members of other local groups, such as Rotary International, JSNO was able to meet its home-stay requirements.

One consideration for the next Exchange would be to build in more down time mid-week. The Exchange Program Committee was excited to showcase New Orleans and days were filled, but volunteers could tell that the Participants were very tired after the initial excitement wore off.

JSNO was honored to be the lead organization for the TOMODACHI Exchange and is extremely grateful for the opportunity offered by the TOMODACHI Foundation and NAJAS to host this Exchange.