Denver is the state capital of Colorado and one of the largest regional cities where 19,000 Japanese Americans live. My host site, Japan America Society of Colorado (JASC) has been fostering Colorado-Japan relations for over 33 years. My mission was to expand the outreach area and connections for JASC, especially outside of the Denver Metro area, and create new programs that would make a big impact on a wide range of generations. I would like to report here what I did for this mission specifically and mention my goal of the second year.

TOTAL ACTIVITY COUNT

125

TOTAL PEOPLE REACHED

3,825
School and Community Visits

During my first year, I visited 68 classes and 15 local community organizations including libraries, immigrant centers and businesses, and reached 3,212 people. Participants learned about general Japanese culture like language, seasonal events, and business manners through my presentations. Among these activities, calligraphy and yukata workshops were the most popular. Not only traditional culture, but also pop culture was a core topic of my presentation for participants over 6th grade. I introduced new trends in art, food, fashion, music, and influencers so they can enjoy talking with Japanese people of the same age group if they ever have the opportunity to make Japanese friends.

Poverty and family challenges are serious issues in the U.S. So for me, the most important purpose of my visit was to show another world so these young people can have hopes and dreams for their future. During my presentation, I introduced famous Japanese people who made their dreams come true by their big efforts. Students wrote their dreams on ema (絵馬) and shared them with others. I saw over 500 dreams on ema and would like to reflect them during my second-year of programming.
Bringing Japanese culture outside of Denver Metro area was the cherished desire of my host site and it was especially significant to visit Greeley and Fort Collins, each approximately 55 miles from Denver.

At a school in Greeley, I did a free onigiri event. Over half of the students at that school receive free or reduced-price school meal due to poverty. Most students hadn't seen or eaten onigiri before in their lives. With the donation of rice and supplies from a Japanese restaurant and onigiri manufacturing company in Denver, we were able to serve onigiri to 150 students.

In Fort Collins, I had the chance to join Cultural week at a middle school and gave many kinds of presentation and activities throughout my 4 day stay. For example, students made Japanese cuisine like sushi rolls and tempura and played goldfish fishing wearing yukata after learning about summer festivals.

While in Fort Collins, I also visited Colorado State University for two days and presented pop culture as well as a calligraphy workshop.

In the second year, I'm planning to visit Steamboat Springs which is more than 100 miles away from Denver. I will continue to try to expand our outreach areas and communities served.
Collaboration with other organizations

I have been passionate about dancing since I was a high school student. At the Denver Takayama Sister City (DTS) annual *bunka-no-hi* event, I presented J-pop music and performed a dance with some K-12 students of the Denver Japanese School.

I choreographed using famous J-pop music, Minna ga Minna Eiyu by AI. The melody of that song is based on an old American folk tune, "Turkey in the Straw". Almost all of students hadn’t danced before, but we practiced very hard in person and on zoom together for a month and they put on the best performance!

One of students dreamt of being an English teacher in Japan to promote U.S.-Japan relations and this event was her first time to serve as a bridge between U.S. and Japan. One of the students was very shy at first because she moved here from Japan a few months ago, but she came to really enjoy expressing herself with dance and ended up talking a lot with big smiles.

I was really impressed by their efforts and got energized from them.

There was one additional amazing experience from this program. AI-san’s aunt watched our performance online from a local Colorado connection and she shared the video with AI-san. I was shocked by this miracle beyond my imagination. This was made possible by the great efforts of these students.

My role as JOI coordinator is to share Japanese culture with people in Colorado. I would not be able to share my culture without support from DTS, JASC and the locals around me.

*Cultural exchange is not one way.*

*Thank you so much for always being there.*
My goals for the second year
My first-year focused on responding to a lot of requests from schools and communities, and passed very quickly. I hope I was able to inspire some of them even a little and will continue to visit schools/communities as much as possible. I will also work on sustainable projects in the second year that can remain here after I go back to Japan. As a result, recently JASC revitalized their Young Professionals Group and I'm leading this effort. I will try to offer workshops and networking meetings so that younger generations can connect with others, enhance Colorado-Japan relations, and develop their own skills.

Comments from my supervisor
It is hard to believe that one year has already passed since Yoko arrived in Denver, while at the same time it feels like she is a long-time partner and collaborator of Japan America Society of Colorado. Yoko fit right in with our little office and took off running. It was amazing to watch the flurry of emails come into our office before the end of the school year in April and May with requests for Yoko to visit local classrooms. Yoko also took over our Kaiwa Club and makes everyone there feel welcome and excited to practice speaking Japanese. In the office we value her input and contributions to all of our activities, even if they are not directly related to her own projects. She is truly a team-player and we can no longer imagine JASC without Yoko! I envision her second year expanding into more leadership opportunities for her with the Young Professionals Group and working more closely with our Board of Directors for their support in her efforts with those young people - the future leaders of our Colorado-Japan relationship. School visits and trips outside of Denver will of course remain a priority as she has created an invaluable program for these teachers and students and she is very good at what she does. We are so excited for our second year with the JOI program. Thank you for this wonderful opportunity.
Annual Report
2022-2023

Yoko Watanabe
Japan America Society of Colorado
OVERVIEW: FALL 2022 THROUGH SUMMER 2023

Compared with the first year, I was able to visit more schools effectively using my core presentation about pop culture and dance activity which I had improved from the first year. Not only in a classroom, but also I had many chances to have a cultural booth at public places such as local libraries. Among them, a Japanese calligraphy table was very popular for all age groups and they enjoyed writing their own name in Japanese.

I got requests for outreach activities from many places that I had visited in the 1st year. In addition, some of them introduced me to their connections so I could spread the JASC outreach area. For example, I was introduced to a school in Eagle Valley which is 2 hours away from Denver and the students could learn about Japanese public manners before their summer trip in Japan. Also I could visit 8 libraries located outside of the Denver metropolitan area for a Japanese summer festival this summer using a connection with one of the staff who collaborated with me for a tanabata festival in the first year.

At the same time, it was very rewarding for me to be more involved with JASC original big events in the second year. For Japan Cup, a Japanese language and cultural competition for middle school to university students, I, as a native Japanese speaker, was a representative of questions and study guide material. At a golf tournament, I managed a cultural competition. I popped up at a golf course and let participants compete by tik-tok dance, Japanese calligraphy and karaoke. It was hilarious and became one of highlights at the tournament.

Through these JOI experiences, I learned a lot about the true value of cultural exchange and the importance of global education for the next generation. So I would like to take a deep dive into these topics in this report.
Passing on traditional Japanese culture is one of the biggest missions for the JOI program. In the fall of 2022, I organized a kimono fashion show at JASC Annual Gala and showed the comparison of traditional and upcycle kimono collaborating with a modern kimono company in San Francisco and presented master techniques of kimono craft workers during the show. We knew what kimono is and how beautiful it is. However, many participants including Japanese people didn't know how beauty is created. So I showed some videos of their master techniques such as dyeing and weaving. It took our breath away and we all understood the true value of kimono. Sadly it's also true that the number of people who wear kimono has been decreasing for some reasons such as price and the way of wearing them. So we hope kimono became closer to participants' daily life through the show of modern style kimono.

JASC has hosted an edo-kite master from Japan for the JASC kite festival and it was the 7th time this spring. The master has been handing it down for over 40 years and we gave a kite-making experience to almost 1,000 people from early child to adult at the workshop and a flying-kite festival. Rather than just teaching how to make a kite, he has cherished his motto that people enjoy it more than anything and children feel self-confidence by flying their own kite successfully. I felt his hospitality is the thing that makes him a master who is the most famous edo-kite master in the world and was honored to work with him. I was sometimes wondering why people have to protect and pass on traditional culture for the future. But I think I found the answer after seeing the children's big smile and the master's soul from his workshop.
JASC has offered a scholarship program to Colorado university students for a long time. But during covid pandemic, it was challenging to cross the border and there was no chance to study abroad for students. Instead, we connected 8 schools online between Japan and Colorado, and gave an opportunity of getting to know each culture and learning each language. Colorado state and Yamagata prefecture have a sister city relationship and elementary school students in Yamagata sent us 100 hand-made hanagasa for celebrating the 30th anniversary. We handed them out to K-12 students in Colorado and danced with hanagasa together. When they received it, they showed their big smiles. Also, each hanagasa had a student's name in kanji who made it and they were really excited when I read the name. We took their dancing video to share it with Japanese students in Yamagata and they showed their big smiles when they watched it.

It's very meaningful to just exchange cultures, but it's also very important to tell about strategies and opportunities against the reality of financial and visa issues to children who are interested in studying and working in the US as soon as possible because the process takes a long time. Even if children are not interested in foreign countries, still it's very important to know potential options in their life. So not only fun and surprising topics of US culture, but I also talked about exchange programs such as the JOI program, scholarship, benefits of having a college degree like OPT and types of visa.

Also, many elementary school students asked me how to study English. Looking back, I felt embarrassed to speak English when I was their age. But actually the percentage of Japanese speakers in the world is only around 120 million against 1.3 billion of English speakers. So I told them that speaking English is very common compared with Japanese and that the US is a melting pot which doesn't have a national language and personality is more important just like the relationship in Japan. Personally I am concerned about the possibility of decreasing the opportunity for studying abroad for the next generation in the near future because of the Japanese economy and losing the interest of learning about outside of Japan eventually. I would like to continue to share my experience with the next generation even after the JOI program.
Colorado has been expected economic growth because there is a Denver International Airport which is one of major international airports in the US and there are many advanced industries such as sustainable energy and aerospace here. On the other hand, 83 Japanese or Japan-based companies maintain operations in Colorado (as of Jan 2023) that we can't say it's a large number compared with big cities. To increase this number, the Colorado governor's delegation including my supervisor visited Japan in spring 2023.

Speaking of the grassroots level, I have met so many young people here who want to work in Japan or be involved in US-Japan business, but also they have been struggling to find connections or job opportunities. So I decided to lead the JASC Young Professional group supported by a wide range of JASC business connections.

Sometime we had a networking event and participants learned about global retail business from our corporate member, Tea with Tae, and our board member, Mont-bell,. The most recent one was a business seminar supported by the Consulate-General of Japan in Denver. Special guest speaker, JETRO from the Los Angeles office, and Japan delegation members gave a presentation about prospects for Japan-Colorado economic & business relations.

Although I have left JASC, many members are waiting for the next event and JASC will continue to lead this group. JASC has been running for over 33 years and they have overcome many difficulties such as covid lockdown with the team. So continuing the stable management, that is exactly a sustainable project for US-Japan relationship. I hope this Young Professional group will become a resource to find potential board members for the JASC future.
Conclusion

My JOI experience was full of joy and I can't imagine my life without it. I joined this program because I wanted to show another world to children who face difficulties within a limited environment so they can feel there are many opportunities in the world whatever their background such as family and community. But in reality, I got a lot of support from people here more than what I gave to them.

I understand there are borders and we have our own nationality. But in the first place, we all are citizens of the earth and were just divided by borders that humans created. Times have changed and now humans can go to space. From this fact, I feel the words "global" and "international" will become obsolete. These days that many global issues such as climate change have been getting serious, I hope people choose an amicable solution rather than an offensive way.

So I would like to continue to be involved with global understanding programs for the next generation throughout my life.

Comments from my supervisor

It will be very difficult for JASC to bounce back after losing Yoko. She was fully engaged in our organization, in the mission of the JOI Program, and in sharing her culture with as many people as possible. Her final act before leaving for Japan was to offer a summer festival experience to a network of libraries in outlying areas at least one hour from Denver. Her activities that she conducted for JASC and also independently on her own were always extremely professional, well-prepared, and enjoyable for all who participated. The number one question I get asked is "Why don't you apply to get another JOI Coordinator?!" Yoko represented the JOI program extremely well in Colorado. She truly made an impact here and everyone fell in love with her. She will be greatly missed.