JOI COORDINATOR AT THE JAPANESE FRIENDSHIP GARDEN OF PHOENIX

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First Year's Overview

Miegakure, “hide and reveal” in English, is a keyword of Japanese stroll gardens. The more you stroll around in a Japanese garden, the more you will encounter the beauty of the garden. This technique is used at the Japanese Friendship Garden of Phoenix, my host site as JOI coordinator. At the beginning, it was difficult for me to see how much I could contribute to my team or local communities and also see the results of my efforts. However, I came to realize that I needed to change my point of view on how to evaluate my work as a JOI coordinator. Contributions cannot be measured by only the number of contact people or scheduled programs, but also by the level of satisfaction of the participants.

A Bit About the Garden

The Japanese Friendship Garden, named RoHoEn, is a joint project of the City of Phoenix and its sister city, Himeji, Japan. This 3.5 acre Japanese Stroll Garden is an ideal place to “do nothing”, to simply enjoy the beauty and serenity of the garden. We also offer many educational and cultural events and workshops at the garden. Please stop by to cool off!
CHALLENGES FOR NEXT YEAR

My focus as JOI coordinator is to help the garden arrange educational and cultural events and also to promote Japanese culture to schools, universities, and other non-profit organizations. This past year, I have discussed with 192 people about future collaboration and outreach plan. Also, 518 people were able to participate in my presentation about Japanese culture. The charts below illustrate that most of the people I have met are living in the Greater Phoenix area. Although my host site is located in Phoenix, I will challenge myself to expand my outreach activities to communities all over Arizona. Especially, Tucson and Yuma area have huge potential for the outreach planning based on my prior visit. However, I also need to find a way for people to continue to deepen their understanding of Japanese culture after my journey ends.
In terms of participant satisfaction, Samurai Night at the Garden was the most successful. Thanks to connections made through Japan Foundation Los Angeles, we were able to invite Samurai performers to the garden to perform at the outdoor movie screening night held at the garden. There were many facets to planning this event, starting from the discussions about when and how to host the performers. I also had to determine how many volunteers were needed and make the necessary arrangements as well as sharing important information with the garden staff. The most challenging task was planning the physical layout of the area, deciding which area of the garden could be used as the performance stage while still being able to set up the movie screen at the same time. After discussing with staff members, I was able to find the right spot for both attractions. As a result, 99% of guests answered “satisfied” on their guest satisfaction surveys. I still remember how relieved I felt after this event, knowing it was a success.
Outside the garden, I had the opportunity to visit 1 elementary school, 6 high schools, 3 universities, and 8 other communities for networking and outreach activities. I was most surprised at the attitude of the high school students. They are eager to learn new things and welcome me anytime. Ms. Caitlyn E. Kolesar, a Japanese teacher at Betty H. Fairfax High School in Laveen, has been supportive of my outreach activities from the beginning. I taught Japanese calligraphy in her class, including how to hold the brush, which side of the paper to use, and how to enjoyably do calligraphy. First, the students practiced writing simple kanji that they have learned before, but then, after they learned how to use the brush, they started asking me how to write kanji that they love. No matter how difficult the kanji, they were excited to express their feelings on paper. I came to the class to teach the students, but I have also learned the importance of being proactive. I will keep reaching out to people in Arizona, but at the same time, I will try to cultivate new experiences.
I have been more than honored to work with Masahiro. Even though we are an authentic Japanese Garden located in the heart of downtown Phoenix, I knew there were many Arizonans who hadn’t had the chance to experience Japanese culture yet and that doing so could greatly broaden their perspectives and enrich their lives. Masa has been doing just that this past year and with great success! Through outreach and networking, he has coordinated cultural experiences at an impressive variety of places such as famous museums like the Musical Instrument Museum, tiny schools in the middle of the desert, food education nonprofits, and local festivals. Masa has given the people in our city (and many miles outside of Phoenix!) the chance to experience Japan without ever leaving their towns. Bringing in a collaboration with the Japan Foundation L.A. and Burai Productions at the Garden and the Yume Garden in Tucson for a Samurai Night was his most impressive feat so far and a massive hit. His outreach to schools has also been popular, with teachers and students requesting his continued presence in their classes month after month. I am grateful and can’t wait to see how Masa continues to impact our community as a cultural ambassador in the year to come.

Masahiro Yamamoto, JOI Coordinator, has cultivated meaningful relationships with the students and staff of Betty H. Fairfax High School in Laveen, Arizona. At Fairfax High School there is a Japanese program and club, but having Yamamoto-san come in on a frequent basis has immensely helped students in the program. Yamamoto-san is very personable and relates well to the students, especially with his background with Spanish. He has done several cultural demonstrations including: traditional Japanese games, kendama, and making onigiri while students did karaoke. Beyond culture, Yamamoto-san helped the students in Japanese class to deepen their knowledge of the language and culture. He did a workshop on calligraphy where students learned how to hold their fude and follow the correct stroke order for the kanji. Additionally, he did another workshop on the Japanese school year events, teaching vocabulary to the 1-2 students. He is enthusiastic and always eager to help. Students love to talk with him in English and Japanese. They are excited when he is coming back to campus. As the Japanese teacher and program lead for my campus, it has been an honor and pleasure to work with Yamamoto-san.