Overview
FALL 2021 THROUGH SUMMER 2022

UNDERSTANDING, CONNECTING AND THINKING

During this term, my main focus was (1) understanding my host sites (2) expanding connections, and (3) looking for ideas for sustainable activities in the future. Fortunately, since the early days, I have received offers from several groups other than Memphis and it helped me in terms of looking at our host sites objectively.

As I am in the unique position of belonging to two different organizations, it took me some time to get to know the characteristics and demands of each organization. However, thanks to my supervisors and colleagues, I was able to get my activities off the ground in the first few months.

At the University of Memphis, I mainly focused on reaching out to students in the Japanese program. I held regular events for them and continuously promoted Japanese culture. The reason that I made efforts strengthening connections with them is that sustained activities require human resources and a self-sustaining system. I believe that the students have that potential. Also, supporting exchange students is another contribution to the university.

About Memphis Botanic Garden, it already had an existing program because of their Japanese garden, but I tried to propose new activities to add some value to it. I have also led some classes for children throughout the year. Conducting research for the renovation of the Japanese garden is also one of my tasks at the Garden.

In addition to these activities at the host sites, I have conducted programs at libraries, elementary schools, high schools, universities, Japanese gardens, a museum, and other community groups. The areas where I have reached cover not only Memphis, but also other cities in Tennessee such as Nashville and Chattanooga, and as far away as Mississippi and Arizona. Besides workshops and presentations, I have performed Koto, a Japanese traditional instrument on several stages.

In this report, I highlight three main topics during this term. All my activities would not have been possible without the support of my supervisors, colleagues, Japan Foundation and Laurasian Institute. I would like to thank all those who have supported me. I hope that I can continue to make a meaningful contribution to the community next term.
1. Language Table

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS

ENCOURAGED LEARNING ABOUT JAPAN

The University of Memphis is the only higher educational institution that offers Japanese as a major in the mid-south region, and there are a number of students who learn Japanese on campus. To those students, the Japanese program offers the weekly Language Table every Friday and it became my main outreach opportunity for the college students.

Throughout semesters, I provided Japanese culture events every two weeks and on average, 38 people participated in each event. The topics ranged from Calligraphy to Graduation songs. Generally, many students become interested in Japan through anime and manga, but by having seasonal themes and topics that even beginners could enjoy, I was able to broaden students’ perspectives and promote continued learning about the Japanese language and culture.

Furthermore, the Language Table has had other impacts. For example, it acted as an opportunity for me to experiment with new activities so that I was able to try them out before going to other schools and events. Also, I could develop a relationship with students through the Table, and succeed to recruit many volunteers for events including the Memphis Japan festival at Memphis Botanic Garden. This led to increasing collaborations with them later. In the next term, I would like to focus on laying the groundwork for student-led events to build sustainability.

Impacts

- Contributed to the continued encouragement of learning the Japanese language and culture
- Succeed to involve the university students to organize Japan-related events
- Increased the potential for sustainable student-centered event management.
2. Furoshiki workshop

AT LOCAL LIBRARIES, GARDEN AND UNIVERSITIES

SPREAD THROUGHOUT MEMPHIS AND TO OTHER CITIES

It started with a small group at a local library but spread to many places eventually. My first Furoshiki workshop was at the Cordova library in Memphis. I talked about the history, various uses, and recent attention to Furoshiki along with a growing awareness of the environmental issue. Then, participants learned how to wrap everyday things with Furoshiki.

At the first workshop, it was not a big group, just 6 participants, but it was well-received and more successful than expected. The reputation of this workshop was shared with other libraries, then I started receiving further offers from other libraries including communities outside of Memphis.

This workshop contributed to expanding connections between libraries and the JOI coordinator, and that brought resulted in the spreading of Japanese culture to the community. Also, the Furoshiki workshop enabled me to achieve my goal of introducing Japanese culture in a way that can apply to everyday life. I hope to continue this activity next term, planting seeds of Japanese culture in people’s daily lives.

*Bought my lunch to work today!*

*Message from one of the participants on the next day of the workshop*

Impacts

- Increased connections with libraries and requests for other Japanese culture programs
- Successfully promoted Japanese culture throughout the community
- Introduced Japanese culture that can be applied to everyday life
3. High school visit
AT WHITE STATION HIGH SCHOOL

MOTIVATED HIGH SCHOOL JAPANESE LEARNERS

There are several high schools offering the Japanese language as a subject in Memphis, and White Station High school is one of them. On January 27th, 2022, I was invited to a speaker event hosted by the Asian American Pacific Islander Alliance of the school.

It was the first high school visit for me, but we had a great turnout, about 40 students attended after class. In my presentation, I talked about Japanese high school life and the students enjoyed the comparison of transportation, school meal, and afterschool activities. In the second half, I provided two activities with multiple aspects. New Year card making is an approach from the art and annual events. They learned how people spend New Year’s Days and enjoyed drawing this year’s zodiac animal, the Tiger, which happens to be the mascot of the University of Memphis. Bon Odori dance was set to enjoy Japanese culture physically and with music. Dancing along with a Japanese folk song brought them not only new perspectives on Japanese culture but also joyful moments with their friends after the pandemic.

While this visit was a success, there was another ripple effect. High school students from other schools began contacting me after seeing my post on Instagram. Since live experiences with foreign cultures are still limited at this time, I would like to continue these high school visits next term.

Impacts

- Contributed to the motivation of high school students studying Japanese
- Provided opportunities for cultural understanding through multiple aspects such as art, music, seasonal events, and dance
- Instagram posts led to offers from other high schools
MY GOAL FOR THE NEXT YEAR

In addition to continuing the relationships I have established with each organization and group, I would like to work on building the foundation for a sustainable system that will continue after the end of my term. I would also like to increase opportunities to visit schools, but not as a one-time visit so that I can make an impact over the long term.

Comments from supervisors

Rebecca Laumann
Executive Director, Center for International Education Services, The University of Memphis

Ms. Yamaoka is an excellent ambassador of Japanese culture and we are grateful to have her as our JOI Coordinator. Ms. Yamaoka spent very little time adjusting to life at Memphis on her arrival. She has maintained an active work calendar and participated in several outreach efforts. Her presence on our campus, the Memphis community, and in our state has been impactful. We estimate that Ms. Yamaoka has connected with over 3700 people through her programming in her first year. The programs she has focused on are sustainable and will continue even after her tenure ends.

Gina Harris
Director of Education and Events
Memphis Botanic Garden

Maika has made such an impact in Memphis and throughout Tennessee in the short time that she has been here. Her willingness to provide programming from small groups of 5 or 6 people up to a festival that served 4,000 people is always approached with equal enthusiasm and dedication. We look forward to another great year with Maika being a part of our Garden and impacting our community.