Japan Outreach Initiative

2022-2023
Annual Report
at Delta State University in Cleveland, MS

JOI Year 20
Mizuki Umebara
Overview

My host site, Delta State University, is located in a small town called Cleveland, Mississippi. The town is surrounded by vast cotton, soybean, and corn fields, and the region is known as the birthplace of blues music. As a small town, people here often wave hello and greet everyone they meet. Living and working here as a JOI coordinator, I have come to really appreciate Cleveland’s big beautiful skies, quiet neighborhoods, and kind people.

My first month in Cleveland was spent settling in and getting to know the region. September came in the blink of an eye and was the month when I had the chance to do my first activity. It was a joint Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cultural event to celebrate the moon festival. My supervisor took the lead during the event and set a great example for me about how to organize events like this in the USA. In October, I launched the Japan Club as my own event for members of the university community as well as the local community at large. Since then, I gradually expanded my outreach towards the local community.

With the beginning of 2023, the number of outreach activities increased rapidly as I fortunately started having invitations from local schools and other organizations. As a result, I reached out to more than 2500 people in total. There were several occasions where I could also participate in big events like a Japan festival out of town. In addition to the events I organized myself, my days were filled with meeting people and visiting schools and local organizations in order to promote Japan and Japanese culture. Now at the end of my first year, it feels like my time in Cleveland has flown by too quickly.

My Annual Top 3 Activities

Every outreach activity was special to me and I can recall all of them vividly and easily even now. In this report, I would like to highlight three outreach activities at different locations and/or organizations. The details of each outreach activity are explained in the next three pages.

1. Japanese Language Club at Delta State University
2. After School Program at Rosedale Freedom Project
3. After School Program
1. Japanese Language Club

Language and Culture Class For beginners at Delta State University

This club was held weekly for 3 months from February 2023 through April 2023. To create this club, I started off by founding a Japanese culture club in the previous semester to see how many people would actually be interested in learning Japanese. As it turned out, more people than I had expected joined the club and most of them completed the whole class till the end. I held Tuesday evening classes and Wednesday afternoon classes so that students and community members could join. The members of each class got along well very quickly and the classroom was always filled with smiles and good humor.

Most of the members had never studied the Japanese language, yet they had great enthusiasm for learning different cultures. To meet their expectations, I did my best to make the lessons interactive and fun and include as many cultural aspects as possible that were related to each week's grammar themes. For example, while teaching students how to ask where the bathroom is, I introduced some of the differences between Japanese and American bathrooms. During other lessons, we played games and had Japanese food taste tests with Japanese penny candy snacks and Soomen noodles.

The camaraderie we had extended beyond our classes. We often gathered outside of class at a local restaurant. It was great to see students from all different backgrounds and countries sharing their own cultures as well as their interest in Japan. In the last class, they secretly prepared a cake for me in order to celebrate the finale of the class for the semester. I'm looking forward to continuing the first class next semester as well as starting a second beginner's class.
2. After School Program

3-Day Workshop at Rosedale Freedom Project

I particularly have vivid memories of this workshop as this was my first time visiting an after school program in the US. As soon as I walked in the door, the atmosphere was friendly, warm, and playful. The kids were studying, playing outside together, and exploring what they were interested in. The program fellows welcomed me, and we started the first workshop day with an introduction to Japan and a Japanese calligraphy activity. From learning how to move the brush to writing Japanese Kanji letters, the students were intensely focused on completing their first calligraphic work.

The second day’s theme was Japanese Martial Arts. It is not well known even by Japanese people, but there are nine different martial arts in Japan. With pictures and handouts, I introduced how they developed and what their philosophies are like. After the introduction, fellows had time to practice Shorinji Kempo, in which I have a black belt. I coached them in how to move their bodies efficiently and taught them the meaning of each movement. There was a message I kept emphasizing in the workshop: martial arts are created to protect oneself, not to harm other people, and also to refine one’s personality with moral and strength. We concluded the day with courtesy bows to show our respect to each other.

The last day was a rolled sushi workshop. Although sushi is very popular in the US, the ingredients and its appearance are quite different from what people eat in Japan. I decided to make sushi in a Japanese style and we covered the rice with seaweed paper. The fellows were very excited to use bamboo rollers and rounded the sushi neatly. During this 3-day workshop all of the participants became good friends. We live in a small town and run into each other often. Every time they see me, they say ‘Hi, Mizuki!’ and I greet them back. I hope this experience will stay with them for a long time and that they develop a greater interest in foreign cultures.
3. Anime Blues Con

Collaboration, Panel talk, and Dancing Yosakoi all together

Anime Blues Con is a 3 day anime convention held annually in Memphis, TN in summer. People who love Japanese anime, manga, and games come even from different states to enjoy shopping, cosplaying, gaming and panel presentations. I was fortunate to get an opportunity to be one of their panel speakers on the second day with Year19 senpai Maika Yamaoka who was based at Memphis at that time. We were very excited to collaborate as we coordinators usually work individually. This event gave us a great chance to make our outreach with discussion and asking questions to each other.

With the allocated 60 minute time frame, we decided to focus our presentations on Japanese high school life and summer festivals as it was the summertime and the summer festivals are commonly featured in anime and manga scenes. We structured the first half of our presentation as a comparison between the depiction of Japanese high school life with reality. The last 30 minutes was dedicated to hands-on activities. After Maika briefly talked about Japanese traditional garments such as Kimono and Yukata, we asked for volunteers from the audience to try them on. We were glad to see many hands raised. After dressing them up, the participants all had big smiles on their faces!

For the finale, everybody in the room took part in Yosakoi, a dance from my home prefecture of Kochi. A festive dance has to be lively. Maika and I invited some wonderful volunteers from our host sites to dance with the dressed audience volunteers. We used real Naruko clatters and chanted the key phrase from the dance as we moved our bodies. It was quite a delightful sight to see more than 130 people dancing and singing together with excitement.
Summary

For the second year

By utilizing all the skills I have learned and developed in my first year, in the future I would like to improve the quality of each activity as well as bring in new aspects of Japanese culture and life.

As someone who had never been to the US before, this year has been an incredible learning experience. In fact, I feel I learned more about American culture than I taught about Japanese culture.

My mission is to bring understanding about Japan and Japanese culture to the people in and around my host site region. I am grateful if people become interested in Japan and find learning a different culture fun through my outreach activities. However, my personal goal is to motivate people to actually go abroad someday.

Actually visiting a place and seeing life there allows people to have a more vivid, sensory experience and impression of that place. I believe the impact of this experience will enrich people’s lives and make the world a better place.

Delta State University shares my passion for introducing students to Japanese culture and so is planning a study trip to Japan that coincides with my return there in 2024. This will definitely be one of the high points of my JOI work. With many small and big goals, I will make my second year more fruitful than it has been in this first year.

Supervisor's Comment

*Unmei.* If there ever was an instance of fate or destiny, it’s the story of how Mizuki Umebara came to a small, rural town in the heart of the Mississippi Delta and changed lives forever. After a long delay because of the pandemic, her first email to me was a much needed shot of hope. She had done her research and learned that our unofficial mascot is the Fighting Okra. Wouldn’t you know it but her home prefecture is the okra growing region of Japan. *Unmei.* Since her arrival, her relentless focus on sharing Japanese culture, dedication to connecting with new people, and endless joy and good humor are just some of the blessings we received by hosting Mizuki at Delta State University. From elementary school children to seniors at a church program, she’s never met a stranger here. We couldn’t be more thrilled with her accomplishments this first year and we look forward to an even better second year. - Michelle Johansen, International Education Coordinator, Delta State University