Overview

Japan America Society of Iowa (JASI) is a small organization but it has six active committees such as Community Outreach, Soten Taiko, Manabiya, Kimono Club, AnimeDemoii and Teahouse Project. The first thing I focused on once I was assigned to my host site, was to build good relationships with each committee and JASI members. I put my effort on establishing solid connections for my host site and myself. My supervisor and colleagues are very supportive, and they always help with my activities when I need them.

As a JOI coordinator, I represent JASI and share both Japanese traditional and modern culture with local people at a grassroots level. In my first year, I had a lot of opportunities to share Japanese cultures such as calligraphy, furoshiki, Japanese business manners, school life in Japan and anime. I reached out to over 1,400 people in the first year from August 2022 to July 2023.

In this annual report, I introduce three activities that I selected from what I have done in my first year.
Elementary School Visits

~Reaching the Northernmost & Southernmost towns in Iowa~

Last spring, I had great opportunities to visit three elementary schools far outside the Des Moines Metro area. Spirit Lake and Okoboji are three hours drive to the north of Des Moines, near the state border to Minnesota. Lamoni is the town at the south end of Iowa.

I talked about the life of elementary school students in Japan showing randoseru, school shoes and textbooks. Also, students made kendama with paper cups and learned how to play the game. In those 3 days, about 170 students joined my presentations.

The students in Okoboji gave me thank you letters after my visit. Although nobody remembered my name, they drew a yellow figure on the letter because I was wearing the Pikachu costume during my presentation, and that was their way of saying they enjoyed what I shared with them. I was very touched by their kind gesture. A month after my presentation, the family I met in Okoboji came to Des Moines and visited me. In Lamoni, my presentations were introduced in the local newspaper. I was honored to receive their warm recognition.

These towns are very small compared to Des Moines, and the students rarely have opportunities to touch Japanese culture. I was very glad that I could connect with them.
Every year, JASI hosts the Japan village at the CelebrAsian festival, the largest Asian festival in the Midwest. This year, the village consisted of 5 tents such as a Food tent, Concession tent, Pop culture tent, Cultural tent and Language school tent. I was assigned to be the leader of the Pop culture tent. I approached a break dance group and two anime companies to collaborate with the Pop culture tent. At first, it was not easy to ask them to help us, but they supported us without any cost. The dance group performed to anime songs in front of the JASI tent. The anime companies donated anime goods such as anime DVD’s and trading cards. These donations were very helpful when we had a limited budget.

Anime videos were played through the festival days. A handmade gacha-gacha machine and Taiko no Tatsujin game attracted visitors. The Pop culture tent was a success. This would not have been possible without help from JASI members and other volunteers.

Also, students of Manabiya, language school of JASI, my coworkers and I danced a fisherman dance called “Soran Bushi” on the main stage. This was a good opportunity to collaborate with Manabiya students where I have been working as TA.

Through this festival, I could share Japanese pop culture and connect with a lot of people.
I held the Tanabata event at the JASI headquarters in July. The Tanabata event was one of the things I wanted to share with local people because I am from Sendai which is famous for the traditional Tanabata festival. I prepared main three things: a presentation about Tanabata, bamboo branches to hang Tanzaku which is a piece of paper to write wishes, and a setup for flowing somen noodles.

In Iowa, it is not easy to get bamboo trees, but fortunately, my supervisor asked the Des Moines Botanical Garden and they provided us with bamboo branches. I was also looking for bigger bamboo trees to use for flowing somen noodles, but I could not find them so I made the somen slide using plastic bottles instead. This was a very fun activity for children and adults. They tried to catch somen noodles with their chopsticks, which was not easy. For this event again, volunteers helped me set up the venue and assist with those activities.

As a result, about 20 people participated in this event. I am glad that I could share Japanese culture with them and make connections between JASI and them. I will hold the Tanabata event again next year, and plan to make longer lanes for flowing somen noodles.
It has been a pleasure and valuable experience to work with Takeshi, and to see him develop his social network to touch people’s hearts in communities near and far. Takeshi arrived right at the timing when our organization was expanding to bring more opportunities of cultural immersion to areas we had not reached out. He has contributed to bringing presentations about traditional and modern Japan to schools and businesses. Since Takeshi joined, it has been a wonderfully activity-filled year for Japan America Society of Iowa.

Takeshi is creatively detail oriented and shows strong care for people he shares his culture with. Before each presentation, he carefully gives thoughts to who the audience is, their age, point of interest, and circumstances, and accordingly prepares presentation material, always thinking how he could make it more fun, more interesting, and more educational. Then, a skillfully crafted fun-filled presentation is delivered with precision, and he receives enthusiastic responses from the audience. He reached out to colleges, high schools and elementary schools and captured the heart of everyone through his activities.

Manabiya, our language school committee, also sent him a great big thank-you. Takeshi has been TA at the weekly language/culture classes. The comments from his co-worker include that he was dependable, always being prepared, willingly adding current topics in Japan to broaden the information shared in the class and supporting students to reach successful performances at seasonal events. He has become an indispensable member of the Manabiya family and students favorite Takeshi-sensei.

Takeshi is striding into the second year with confidence, when he will be planning new activities and reaching further out into rural areas in the State. We have no doubts that his outreach effort will impact many more people, and through these encounters, he will continue to make differences in our community, as a cultural ambassador and as a great friend.