Presentations on the Activities of JET Programme Participants

Smiles in the City of Trees

MC : We will now move onto the presentations about the activities of participants in the JET Programme.

First, we have a presentation from Ms. Emiko Okuyama, Mayor of Sendai, and Ms. Melissa Hill, Coordinator for International Relations for the city of Sendai. The theme of their presentation is ‘Smiles in the City of Trees’.

Ms. Emiko Okuyama, Mayor of Sendai : Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Hello Melissa. I’m so nervous. Are you?

Ms. Melissa Hill, CIR, Sendai City : I am.

Ms. Okuyama : We’re both nervous, so please go easy on us! As the moderator so kindly introduced me just now, I am Emiko Okuyama and I am the Mayor of Sendai. Today, Melissa, who works as a Coordinator for International Relations in Sendai, and I would like to talk to you about what kind of activities the Coordinators for International Relations have been engaged in Sendai. Firstly, Melissa, could I ask you to introduce yourself?

Ms. Hill : Thank you. My name is Melissa Hill. I am from the state of Vermont in the United States, and I was assigned to Sendai in July 2015. Today, I would like to present on my activities as CIR.

Ms. Okuyama : Thank you, Melissa. You came to Sendai in 2015, so that was after the Great East Japan Earthquake. I understand you specifically requested to come to Sendai. Did that have something to do with your
thoughts about the earthquake?

Ms. Hill: Actually, I had just returned to the United States from Japan when the earthquake struck, and because of the earthquake, I wasn’t able to go back to Japan and had to wait back home in America. I wanted to go back to Japan to support the Japanese people, so when I applied for the position of Coordinator for International Relations, I asked to be assigned to Sendai. I am very happy to be able to engage in a variety of activities in Sendai.

Ms. Okuyama: Thank you. Let’s move onto the next photograph. The name of the famous warrior and lord, Date Masamune, is synonymous with Sendai. This is a commemorative photograph of the G7 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors Meeting in Sendai, taken in front of the famous statue of Date Masamune on his horse at Aoba Castle. When this major meeting was to be held in Sendai, Melissa worked very hard to make sure Sendai was more prepared to welcome our international visitors. Melissa, could you tell us a little about what your job entailed?

Ms. Hill: I worked as the project leader for the hotels that provided the venues for the G7 meetings. The aim of the project was to improve these hotels’ handling of foreign guests. For this project, I worked with the ALTs who had been assigned to Sendai.

Ms. Okuyama: So you talked to the people at the hotels. What sort of things did you give them advice on?

Ms. Hill: The ALTs and I pretended to be foreign guests, showing up to restaurants, front reception, shops, and other places in the hotel, where we would speak to the Japanese staff to help them practice. Initially, the staff were very unused to dealing with foreign guests, and would look very surprised when they saw us. Many of them thought that there was no way they could deal with guests in English and many even tried to run away as soon as they saw a foreigner approaching. When I saw that, I thought to myself, these people really are not used to foreigners and I wondered what we could do.

Ms. Okuyama: That’s probably true. This was at Akiu Onsen, which is a major hot springs resort about 30 minutes’ drive from the Sendai city centre. The problem is that they receive very few foreign tourists there, combined with the shy nature of the Tohoku people, so I really think that they were very hesitant about talking in a foreign language. So, how did you approach this?

Ms. Hill: Firstly, we would smile at the staff who tried to run away and speak to them in Japanese. We would say to them, ‘Just try. You can do it.’ The Japanese staff would stop for a minute and we would say to them, ‘Let’s try together. Let’s practice English.’ That would put them at ease and they were then able to practice English with us.
The more we visited these places, the more the staff became used to us, and they started trying out new things in English and showing them to us. They translated things like signs and restaurant menus and showed them to us and asked us what we thought. After a while, the staff changed from their previous looks of terror and started greeting us with warm smiles.

Ms. Okuyama: I’m so happy that you worked so hard to help them get used to you. You must have gone there so many times. How many times did you go to Akiu Onsen?

Ms. Hill: The ALT volunteers and I went there about 40 times.

Ms. Okuyama: Wow. You really were very enthusiastic in your engagement with this program. In Japan, we have a saying to the effect, rather than studying, it’s better to just do it and get used to it, and that is really the case with foreign languages, isn’t it? So, at your urging as CIR, the ALTs working at schools with the JET Programme supported you as volunteers.

Ms. Hill: That’s right. Not just everyone in the International Division, but the ALTs assigned to Sendai were a huge help, and the ALT assigned to the elementary schools in Akiu was particularly enthusiastic, coming up with a variety of proposals to make our lessons even better. Looking at them really motivated me as well. I was really inspired by his desire to work hard for the sake of the town of Akiu.

Ms. Okuyama: I used this example of the G7 meeting to convey to you all how people like Melissa, who wanted to come to Sendai, have come to Japan because they love Japan and, while understanding the feelings of the Japanese people, also give us a push, and how this has helped to raise the standard of grassroots exchange between locals and international visitors.

Next, Melissa, could you tell us about what your regular job entails?

Ms. Hill: I think that the project that I just talked about could be useful not just for the G7, but for other subsequent projects that would attract foreign tourists, but usually, I work in the City Hall doing translations and interpreting, and I also work for the Sendai Tourism, Convention and International Association. I do things like planning international exchange events and interacting with local Japanese residents.

Ms. Okuyama: I understand you came up with a very interesting plan. Could you tell us what it was?

Ms. Okuyama: If we take the words at face value, ‘Stone Soup’ would be a soup made of soup, and I think in Japanese it has been translated as ‘The World’s Most Delicious Soup’. I’ve heard of it, but I don’t know much about it. Could you tell us what it’s about?

Ms. Hill: I studied it in elementary school. In America, we have something called ‘pot luck’. It’s an event where people each bring different food ingredients to one place and cook various dishes together. I wanted to put on a ‘stone soup’ event. We put the ingredients that everyone bought into big pots and made delicious soups.

Ms. Okuyama: So, is it something similar to a thing we have in Japan called yaminabe, or ‘pot in the dark’?

Ms. Hill: Well, actually, I only heard the word yaminabe for the first time when I started planning this event. But, it’s not quite the same as yaminabe. At the pot luck, everyone looked at the ingredients that they had brought and talked to each other as they decided which pot each ingredient should be put into to make the most delicious soup. People brought some interesting ingredients—for example, someone brought apples—and everyone talked to each other and made the ingredients into delicious soups.

Ms. Okuyama: I see. So it didn’t have the slightly eerie connotations that yaminabe has. My apologies. So, this Stone Soup, which you read about in a picture book when you were small, was the inspiration for people of all ages coming together in a community hall far away in Sendai in Japan, to enjoy delicious food. I love this, because to me, this is exactly what local grassroots exchange is all about. Why did you decide to make it a ‘stone soup’ event?

Ms. Hill: I love to cook. Part of my job is to plan exchange events, but I thought that probably a lot of Japanese people think that they were just about English and that they couldn’t participate in international exchange because of that. I thought that, because many Japanese people love foreign cuisine, if I could connect an event to cooking, it would make it easier to foster cultural exchange. So, I wanted to do a cooking event, but the staff at City Hall said that we didn’t have enough in the budget for something like that.

Ms. Okuyama: I’m sorry. It’s the Mayor’s fault for not securing a large enough budget. (Laughter)

Ms. Hill: No, no, no, not at all. Anyway, when I was told that I couldn’t do what I wanted because there wasn’t the budget for it, the other CIR and I put our heads together and we came up with the idea that, if we made it an American-style pot luck, in which everyone brought along the ingredients, we wouldn’t need a budget to organize
the event. So we got creative and were able to turn it into an event that also showcased our culture.

Ms. Okuyama: That's wonderful. Thank you so much for your kind consideration of the city's budget. In Japanese, we have a saying, 'to eat together from the same pot'. I'm sure that everyone gathering around the same pot to eat meant that their hearts were linked even more closely.

We've just about run out of time, but I'd like to ask you, Melissa, what your thoughts are on internationalisation, what you think we should consider going forward.

Ms. Hill: From my own experience, having studied Japanese and worked here in Japan and thinking about various things, I've come to realize that many Japanese people think that they need to be able to speak English to talk to foreigners. However, I think that it's not just about English. For Japanese people to be able to interact with foreigners, what they really need is not English, but smiles.

Also, although some Japanese people tend to freeze because they can't speak English, and the hotel staff tried to run away, I do think that, even if you don't have confidence in your own English ability, if you smile and interact with them even in Japanese, those foreign visitors may fall in love with Japan. If you smile and speak to them in simple Japanese, you will make a good impression, and the foreign visitors will come to love Japan a little bit more.

Ms. Okuyama: That's a wonderful way to see it. It is all about smiling.

Ms. Hill: That's right.

Ms. Okuyama: All right then, let's make our departure from the stage with huge smiles on our faces. Thank you very much.

Ms. Hill: Thank you.

Mission: Spread the Word of the Charms of Goto City

MC: Thank you very much. Next, a presentation by students of Sakiyama Elementary School in Goto City, Nagasaki prefecture, and Mr. Daniel Cohen, the Assistant Language Teacher. The theme is 'Mission: Spread the Word of the Charms of Goto City'.