

Hope for Youth



In the aftermath of the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan last March, the mission in Tokyo, with the support of a group of Canadian language schools, decided to offer scholarships to young Japanese so they could study English or French in Canada and experience the world's support for their country.

The need was great. Not only had almost 20,000 people lost their lives, but many children in the affected region had lost one or both parents.

Within weeks of the disasters, the public affairs team at the Canadian embassy began piecing together ideas. They were intrigued by a suggestion from Jim Clark, Chairman of the Board and owner of the Canadian College of English Language in Vancouver, who proposed that young Japanese from the disaster area receive scholarships to study in either official language in Canada. In its 20 years of existence, his school had welcomed more than 5,000 Japanese students to its classrooms. "When we saw those images on television of the tsunami, we realized that we had to help. Our students, our neighbours, our friends were in trouble," he said.

Clark's suggestion fit in well with the mandate of the Canada-Japan Leadership Fund, which the embassy had established in 2009 to mark the 80th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Canada and Japan. "But, more than that, it addressed some of the psychological needs of young people just after the tsunami—offering them refuge and respite in a time of disaster," said Christine Nakamura, then-counsellor, Public Affairs Section, at the embassy.

The project was a true Japan-Canada collaboration, with the embassy as the bridge. Languages Canada, which represents 165 language schools across the country, was more than ready to support Jim Clark's idea and waive tuition fees for the Japanese students as well as arrange for free accommodation—usually in private homes, but sometimes in school dormitories.

Additional support came from other corners: Air Canada offered reduced airfares to the students; Samantha Thavasa Japan Ltd., a manufacturer of women's fashion accessories, offered ¥15 million



Nozomi Onodera (front row, centre) with fellow students in Vancouver

(\$185,000) to subsidize these fares, largely because the company's CEO, Kazumasa Terada, attributed much of his success to his two years of study in Canada; and Guard.me, an insurance company affiliated with Languages Canada, offered free travel insurance.

When the embassy sent out a call for applications—open to Japanese citizens between 15 and 30 years of age who had lost family members, their home or a job, or had been evacuated due to the nuclear emergency in Fukushima—hundreds of young Japanese responded. Using information from the applications, embassy staff matched successful applicants to participating schools across the country. By the end of the program, a total of 150 students will have made the journey to Canada. So far, 98 have come, studying on average for one month. Applications for a final allotment of 52 placements are due in the coming weeks.

Nozomi Onodera, who lost her mother in the tsunami, will never forget her time in Canada. Not only did her English improve during her studies in Vancouver, but she felt healed by her interactions with her host family. "When I spoke about the disaster, they shared my experience as though it were their own and cried with me—and I felt a great sense of release and relief." She will use her improved English in writing scientific papers in her specialty, neurological development, and hopes to return to Canada someday to do research in the field.