

Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences experience earthshaking class trip to Japan

By Robert Nott | The New Mexican

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Photo by: [Jane Phillips](#)

The 10 students from the Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences thought they just were getting a lesson in culture and language when they traveled to Japan for a 10-day visit earlier this month.

And then the 9.0 magnitude earthquake hit on March 11, and the students learned about the power of friendship, how Japan's television journalists actually report the news rather than embellish the facts, and how a community can act calm and collected in the face of a frightening national disaster.

They also discovered how clean Japan is.

The seventh- and eighth-graders, all of whom are studying Japanese at the small south-side, nonprofit, expeditionary learning school, raised their own funds to visit the towns of Yokohama, Kamakura, Fujisawa, Tsuyama, Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo.

Well, they ended up skipping Tokyo after the quake, actually.

But they got the chance to visit a Japanese public school.

"Japanese kids have a lot of respect for their teachers, and the teachers have a lot of respect for their students," said seventh-grader Isaiah Wilder.

While at the school in Tsuyama, the students performed two musical numbers for their host students: the Japanese tune "Haru Ga Kita" ("Spring is Coming") and the Beatles' "With a Little Help From My Friends." They used iPod music for accompaniment.

The American students, accompanied by two adult chaperones, were a big hit in Tsuyama. Japanese children and teenagers crowded around them in school and even climbed nearby trees to take a gander. Some of the Japanese teen girls asked the American girls whether the American boys were available for, uh, dating.

And the Americans noted that Japanese students generally walk or bike to school.

Of course, some misconceptions may have existed. Seventh-grade student Ariel Soloway said a lot of the Japanese kids he spoke with had developed a mindset about Americans based on seeing American movies.

"The film image is sex, drugs, violence," he said. "They thought we were like that."

On the other hand, Japanese retail stores were playing hard-core, uncensored American hip-hop and rap that made the American visitors blush.

"These little old ladies are in there shopping and they didn't know what the lyrics meant," Wilder said.

Each student stayed with an individual host family. There, the students discovered that while they were trying to practice Japanese, their hosts wanted to show off their capacity for English.

Cellphones with translation devices, which are very popular with the Japanese, were a big help all the same, several students said.

The visitors were impressed with the organizational style of city sidewalks, where fast-moving pedestrians moved to one side to overtake slower-moving peers. Likewise, a track for blind people was available, and "everyone else knew not to walk on it," said eighth-grader Jende Cohen.

Garbage didn't seem to exist, since people simply picked up their own trash and disposed of it at the next available garbage or recycle bin.

The earthquake and tsunami threw everything off. The host families were overly concerned for their guests, reassuring them that they would be OK during the crisis. Some of the kids caught the news on Japanese television.

"The newscasters were not as sensationalistic as American newscasters," Soloway said. "They were truthful and straightforward. They just showed the shots of what happened and interviewed people."

They watched television coverage of Japanese victims calmly lining up for water and supplies in damaged cities.

Some students, still unaware of the disaster, got calls from relatives in Santa Fe asking if the group was out of danger.

Coincidentally, a few days earlier the students had slept through a smaller earthquake in Yokohama — an event so small they thought it was just a passing train. So when concerned parents said, "Are you OK? Did you survive the earthquake?" some of them said, "Earthquake? That was nothing."

But while stuck in Tsuyama when the trains stopped running, the students found an unexpected ally in Hidekuni Ehara, who knows former Santa Fe Mayor Larry Delgado and was instrumental in starting a Sister Cities program between Santa Fe and Tsuyama years ago.

They met Ehara at a ceremonial dinner, and upon hearing about their plight, he not only got them all a hotel room for one night but helped arrange for a bus to take them to Osaka instead of Tokyo.

To change their airline tickets, the group had to ante up \$14,000. And this on a Saturday, when the banks were closed. Ehara sent a friend out to a local convenience store five times (because you can't make big withdrawals all at once) to raise the money, which he loaned to the group.

The school has since paid him back.

Asked what they learned from their sojourn overseas, the students repeated the same ideas: how to be more respectful, how to better organize their personal belongings and how to accept and understand other cultures.

"There is so much respect in Japan, even for people you don't know," said seventh-grader Lauren Sarkissian. "Even when it's rush hour, and everyone is running to make the trains, people are polite. I was having trouble carrying my bag up the stairs, and this random old lady stopped to help me carry it, even though she was trying to make her train.

"It's so different from here in America, where it's 'me, me, me' all the time. In Japan, it's 'everyone.' "

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