

Students Repay Host Nation

By Kate McGraw

For the Journal

Three cheers for Hide Ehara! The Japanese businessman in Santa Fe's sister city of Tsuyama not only helped organize the March 7-17 visit of 10 students from the Santa Fe School for the Arts and Sciences to Japan, he also went way beyond the call of duty — including lending \$14,000 of his own money — to get the kids back home to their families in the wake of the March 11 earthquake and tsunami.

The money was promptly repaid, SFSAS Principal Rayna Dineen assured the Journal. Now the school's students want to repay his kindness, and the kindness of their host families, by raising funds for disaster relief in the stricken country. A fundraiser at Jackalope will feature sales of Japanese souvenirs, art work, Zuni pots and a variety of other items at a special booth. Middle school students also will provide musical entertainment from noon to 3 p.m. at the performance stage on the Jackalope grounds.

The youngsters know that any money they raise will be a drop in the bucket of multibillion-dollar need in Japan. But as Lauren Sarkissian, 13, bluntly put it, "helping some people is better than helping no people."

Sarkissian was one of the students who made the unprecedented visit. Japan, she reported, is "a really, really pretty country," a place that is much greener than Santa Fe. The people there are quiet and respectful, she said.

"From my experience," the composed teen said, "the people love to have Americans visit because they love to practice their English and they really love it when you try to speak Japanese."

The Santa Fe students had a great adventure, landing at Narita Airport in Tokyo. They spent three days in the capital city and then went on to Tsuyama, which is about 450 miles south of the earthquake-tsunami zone. They were staying with host families who did everything in their power, Dineen said, to keep the children going about their planned visits and excursions after the disaster struck. She said the students did not feel the quake that far south, but they knew from images on TV that a great disaster had happened to their host country.

Sarkissian said her family got her on their computer so she could e-mail her parents that she was fine. "Our families at home were totally freaking out, but we were still having a great time," she said.

The resolve was typical of the Japanese host families, student Ben Bajema, 13, said. "They remained very calm, and obviously were determined that it would not affect our stay."

Sonja Matias, 12, said Japan is a "very respectful country. Everybody's so nice there. Nobody's mean."

"Respectful" is a word that all three students used. The care Japanese people take not to encroach on each others' space struck Bajema. And the food, they said, was "awesome."

"It was delicious," Bajema said. "One of my classmates and I made a pact to eat the craziest things we could find. It was all awesome, except the raw squid tentacles. They were a little ... um ..."

In the wake of the earthquake, it became obvious that the original plan to return to Tokyo and fly from there was not viable, Dineen said. When the decision was made to fly from Osaka, Ehara drove the kids there. He called in his own travel agent to help arrange the best passage home, taking everyone to lunch and paying the bill.

Then came the real crunch. "His travel agent found us great tickets on Korean Air and our travel agent in Santa Fe was able to get the flight from LAX to Albuquerque," Dineen said. "Then we found out that they do not accept credit cards in Japan when you are buying tickets. You need to wire cash.

"It was Saturday and all the banks were closed. Ehara-san sent his assistant out five times that day to withdraw enough cash from a convenience-store ATM and wire it to the ticket office to insure we could get our tickets that day. He didn't even know us and yet he paid out \$14,000 without even a deposit from me."

If you go

WHAT: Fundraiser for Japan relief: special sales and entertainment WHEN: 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Saturday, April 9 WHERE: Jackalope, 2820 Cerrillos Road CONTACT: 505-438-8585