

November
2016

No. 22

The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: Volunteering in Minami Furano



www.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp

MINAMI FURANO VOLUNTEER



On a beautiful day in October, 13 JET Programme participants from all over Hokkaido came together to volunteer in Minami Furano, a town that suffered extensive damage from Hurricane Lionrock which swept through Hokkaido in late August. In Minami Furano, the damage came mostly from the record high rain fall which caused the nearby river to flood into the town. Trees were uprooted, roads and bridges washed away, and buildings were flooded. Fields of crop waiting to be harvested were hit by massive amounts of water and some were even swept away entirely. Recovery efforts have been ongoing since then, and the Minami Furano Volunteer Center was created to help organize the many helping hands that come to give to the cause.

Many volunteers travelled over three hours and woke up before the sun to make it on time. By 9am we all gathered in the volunteer center, a gym that has been transformed into a buzzing hub of activity. Suited up in old clothes, parkas, and tall rain boots, we were ready to get dirty! Some people even came prepared with shovels. The volunteer center was extremely kind – they allowed us to all stay together and volunteer in the same location: the farm of an remarkably kind and positive man located right along the riverside.

The first half of the day was spent cleaning up debris and trash

that had been swept into a bean field. The bean plants were completely encased in mud and plastered to the ground. The volunteers collected everything from small ceramic and glass shards to whole beer bottles and tree branches. Seeing the poor plants covered in mud and beginning to rot was heartbreaking, but it felt good to clean up the field a little bit so that the farmer could at least run his machines and begin to look towards next year.

The second half of the day was much more taxing, both emotionally and physically. Although the damage to the bean field was evident, the destruction we saw in the area directly next to the river was much more shocking. The owner of the farm called the area a ‘mini grand canyon.’ The overflowing river had cut deep ridges into the bank and all along the shore. Area that had once been fields was unrecognizable as anything but a stony, muddy riverside. It was hard to imagine fields had ever been there! The greenhouses were warped into unrecognizable shapes and twisted up with mud filled plastic and uprooted plants. The second half of the day was spent attempting to untangle that mess.

The metal poles were all connected by rusted wires, some were even half buried, and inevitably they were all some way or another tied up with plastic, plants, and other parts of the

former greenhouse. It was difficult to know where to begin. However, after a while we all got the hang of it. With 13 JET volunteers and 6 Japanese volunteers all pitching in, we set to work. In just a few hours we managed to clean up around half of a fallen greenhouse. At the days end, all of us were covered in mud and tired, but almost everyone wanted to continue working. Everyone was committed to the project, and you can tell that we all got a sense of satisfaction putting things right.

We only made a small dent in the recovery for this farm, but the

owner was grateful to have any help at all. After we packed up our tools, he took us over to a carrot field that had managed to escape damage. With a smile, he told us, "You can pick as many as you like, as long as you tell everyone how delicious they are!"

Even after losing many of his crops to the typhoon, he still went out of his way to thank us. I think he represents Japan and the Japanese spirit – they get knocked down over and over by natural disasters, but they always have the strength to get up, smile, and forge ahead.

A WORD FROM THE VOLUNTEERS

"The Hidaka region, where I live and teach, was badly hit by the successive typhoons of late August and early September. While driving along the country roads, I once stopped and talked to some onion farmers whose crop was clearly devastated. I wanted to help but I didn't know how. Moreover, I knew that the damage my area received was relatively small compared to the Minami-Furano area. I like being outside in cool fall weather and working with my hands, so it really wasn't hard to convince me to give up a Saturday to help out in the area. Thanks to Emily Schuster for making the experience accessible to us. I would definitely volunteer again." **Jackson Powers, Niikappu (USA)**

"The first thing I noticed immediately was the mood of the family members; even after their fields had collected many piles of debris and garbage, they did nothing but smile, welcome us onto their property, and introduce us to their adorable pet cat. Despite the damage and large amount of work to do, the atmosphere was unceasingly fun and friendly. I was so surprised by the warmth I felt from the family, and I really hope they're all doing well today!" **Charlotte Emmott, Kitami (Canada)**

"I like to think that, as ALTs, our job serves as a way to better our communities. However, I felt that the devastation caused by the typhoons this summer called for physical involvement in order to make a difference. In all honesty, I was disheartened by the state of Minami-Furano when I arrived. In saying that, the gratitude and outlook of all of those at the volunteer center, as well as the individuals we helped directly, left a pretty huge impact on me. This was probably the most important activity I've been a part of in Hokkaido, and I'm immensely grateful to all those who organized and participated in it."

Christopher 'Fergie' Brownoff, Rikubetsu (Canada)

"I had a great time volunteering in Minami Furano. It was a great chance to bond with the HAJET community while helping out victims of the typhoon." **Jacob Werschey, Asahikawa (USA)**

"It was my first volunteering experience and I never thought it could be very heartwarming and fulfilling. The whole-day work wasn't grueling at all. Pulling out metals and other rubbish stuck in the mud seemed to be an easy task as everybody worked hand-in-hand. The farm's owner was kind enough to reward us with unlimited carrots at the end of the day which made us extremely happy. I went home with a satisfied heart knowing I have somehow helped Minami-Furano stand up on its feet again after the widespread devastation it suffered from the typhoon. I look forward to another volunteering experience!"

Angel Faith Albaracin, Aibetsu (Philippines)

"Seeing the damage that the typhoon brought over to Minami Furano made me realize just how vulnerable we all are to natural disasters. It made it a very real thing. Before this volunteer activity, natural disasters felt like a very distant event, something that I would only see on television and affecting strangers who I could only extend my thoughts to. But physically going to farms that were damaged and meeting those who were in need of help reminded me that this could have happened to anyone, and that it would require the help of many to restore the life of even just one. What would have happened if I were in their situation? How long would it take to restore my life to how it was before the disaster? Would I be able to do it alone? These were questions that I began to ask myself, and they may not have crossed my mind if I had not volunteered in Minami Furano." **Mia Abe, Biei (USA)**





HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT



There are over 200 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. We come from all over the world and we all have a very unique experience with the island. In each edition of the Red Brick Bulletin, I will introduce a current JET living in Hokkaido. Each has their own story to tell – let's get to know them!



MEET MATT NECHACOV...

BIOGRAPHY: Matt is in his 5th and final year as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in Nayoro and the surrounding area. He was born in Ontario, Canada. After receiving a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and Rhetoric, he packed his bags and came to Hokkaido!

What brought you to Hokkaido?

A I've always wanted to try living abroad. After I finished my Bachelor's Degree in University, I thought it would be the best chance to go somewhere and experience something challenging. After toying with the idea of a few countries, I chose Japan. My brother and I had previously been on a backpacking trip to Japan and we were really impressed by the cultural depth and history of the country. I thought travelling in Japan was fun, but I really wanted to see what living in the country was like. I chose Hokkaido because we never had the chance to visit it on our backpacking trip and it seemed like a really interesting place in Japan; it's connected but separate.

How has your experience been so far?

A It has been incredible! The things I've seen and the relationships I've made will stick with me forever. I don't think I'm ready to leave quite just yet.

What has been your most memorable moment in Hokkaido?

A It's really difficult to pinpoint one moment because they all kind of connect together with others. I guess it would be a toss-up between the

very first night I spent in Nayoro and the day of my wedding in Asahikawa. Some people say they think I'm a pretty relaxed kind of person, but both of those moments were probably the most anxious and nervous I have ever been. I guess they were both starting points of a new life, too!

What is your favorite thing about Nayoro?

A Hmm, this is also pretty tough to choose. I love the scenery around Kamikawa. I came from a city in Canada that is very flat, so it's really awesome to be surrounded by mountains everywhere I go. I also love the insane amounts of snow we get in Nayoro. Being from Canada, everyone thinks that I am used to snow. No...not like this. I had never had to shovel snow off of a rooftop before I came here. It's unbelievable.

Anything else you'd like to share?

A Living in Hokkaido has been such a crazy and wonderful experience. Coming with practically no Japanese ability, and being taught the language and culture by the teachers and people I've met, I couldn't ask for a better way to really experience what living in Japan is like.

All issues of The Red Brick Bulletin can be accessed at http://pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/ss/tsk/akarenga_eng.htm

Published by the International Affairs Division, Department of Policy Planning and Coordination, Hokkaido Government (Edited by Emily Schuster)
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