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Sister City Exchange Between Small Towns

by Toshihiro Menju

While working on "Revitalizing Regional Exchanges between the United States and Japan: Exploring new opportunities of Sister City Exchanges," a project cosponsored by the Japan Center for International Exchange and the Japan Foundation, I had the opportunity to visit Kanayama district in Gero city, Gifu Prefecture. Gero is a new town that was formed by the merging of five towns in March of this year. Kanayama, which enjoys a sister city relationship with Ketchikan in Alaska, was one of the towns that was merged to form Gero.

My visit to Kanayama happened to coincide with the visit of a group of junior high school students from Ketchikan, so I had the unique opportunity to observe their impressions of their host town. Kanayama and Ketchikan are both small towns with populations under 10,000 people. Each of the towns has one junior high school and four elementary schools, all of which are joined as sister schools to their international counterparts.

Every year, a group of junior high school students from Kanayama visits Ketchikan and a group from Ketchikan travels to Kanayama. Generally, almost all of the students from Kanayama who want to go to Ketchikan are able to participate in the program. About twenty junior high school students participate each year. Likewise, every year there are also about twenty junior high school students from Ketchikan who visit Kanayama even though they don't receive any funding from the Ketchikan government. Generally, in sister city relationships, even in exchange between large cities, each city sends a delegation every other year. There are also many cases in which the Japanese side sends a delegation every year but the American side only sends one every other year.

In the case of Ketchikan, however, even though the participants have to pay their own way, there are about sixty people every year who apply to participate. Program organizers have to work hard to choose the approximately 20 participants. Why is it that a town like Ketchikan with fewer than 10,000 people is this enthusiastic about exchange with a small town in Japan?

One reason can be found in Alaska itself or the fact that Ketchikan is on an island. The people of Ketchikan, in one

of the most remote regions of the United States, often refer to their own town as the "frontier." They are particularly outward looking, and the interest in travel, not just within the United States but also overseas, is incredibly high. It is not a particularly wealthy community, and it has a high percentage of people under the age of 18 and above the age of 40. Parents actively encourage their children to travel overseas as part of their education.

Aside from geographic reasons, another reason could be that there is an organization on the Ketchikan side, the Ketchikan-Kanayama Exchange Association, which manages the exchange. Selection of the students to travel to Kanayama is finalized about one year before the students depart for Japan. After they are chosen, the participants get together over the weekends to study Japanese culture. They also make and sell pizza in their community to raise a portion of the funds needed to cover their travel costs. The tradition of watching the Superbowl on television while eating pizza made by junior high school students getting ready to go to Kanayama has taken root in Ketchikan. The head of the delegation stressed that, since the children engage in a series of activities leading up to their trip to Japan, the most important impact is that even the more passive children grow into more proactive, confident children through their stay in Kanayama. Ketchikan's junior high school students learn how to take their shoes off upon entering homes, how to greet people in Japanese, and how to eat Japanese food properly. They also master Japanese etiquette. I was impressed that their etiquette was more refined than that of most Japanese students.

The attitude that people take on the Kanayama side in welcoming the students from Ketchikan is another key to the success of the program. The visit of the students from Ketchikan becomes the event of the year in Kanayama. Almost everyone in Kanayama knows about their visit. People are eager to talk with the students when they see them on the street. The students stay with host families the entire time that they are visiting Kanayama, and the host mothers refer to the children from Ketchikan as "my child." They receive a warm welcome into the families, as though they were a member of the families. Because of its visibility throughout the small community, the Kanayama-Ketchikan sister city relationship has helped to secure the roots of international exchange in regional society.

With the merging of the towns, however, Kanayama has become part of Gero City, bringing Japan to a turning point in its exchange between small towns. At the second meeting of the investigative committee on Revitalizing Regional Exchanges between the United States and Japan, scheduled to be convened in Gero City on June 28-29, we plan to share opinions with the new mayor on ways in which the impact of the exchange with Kanayama can be continued and further developed.

Please send comments/inquiries to grassnet@jcie.or.jp.