

**JET Program 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemorative Symposium  
Commemorative Address**

**“A Triumph of Soft Power”**

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I wish to thank the organizers, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and CLAIR, for inviting me today. I also would like to acknowledge Minister Kawabata, Minister Genba, and Minister Nakagawa; Governor Yamada; Ambassador Warren, Ambassador Roos, Minister Lee and all of the many distinguished guests who have been with us today.

I can think of no greater honor than to be asked to address this symposium, and this is because the JET Program has played such an important role in international affairs—and also, on a personal level, in my own life.

In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the JET Program has changed the course of my life and is responsible for my current career. Twenty years ago, as a senior in college, I was fascinated with Africa and wanted to find a way to work there on development issues. I spent much of my free time looking for job openings in Africa, and I found several promising leads. While I was doing this, a friend told me about this new program which was little known at the time and which would pay me to live in another country. That was the JET Program, which was then in its fifth year. I took her advice and submitted an application, although I was not very serious about it. To be honest, at the time I really knew nothing about Japan, and I would have had trouble even finding it on a map.

In the end, I had to choose between a possible job in Africa and participating in the JET Program. My heart was with Africa, but the decision ultimately came down to plane tickets. I would have to purchase my plane ticket to Africa on my own but, as a new college graduate, I had only \$200 in my bank account and at that time an Africa ticket cost close to \$2,000. Meanwhile, the Japanese government was offering to pay for my plane fare to come to Japan. So, I swallowed hard and came to Japan with the intention of staying for one year, until I could earn enough money to go to Africa.

I was assigned to a post in the countryside in Ehime Prefecture and quickly fell in love with my community—possibly because I was a farm boy myself, and it felt very familiar in many ways. Instead of the planned one year, I ended up staying three years, two years on the JET Program commuting to tiny junior high schools on the islands of the Seto Inland Sea, and a third year as research student at Ehime University.

My time on the JET Program had such a strong impact on me that I returned to the United States in order to study US-Japan policy at graduate school. Not only did these studies provide me with intellectual stimulation, but they also introduced me to my wife. So, you can say that our marriage is one indirect consequence of the JET Program. And my entire career since then has been dedicated to Japan affairs. All in all, my experiences on the JET Program have dramatically changed the course of my life and, in many ways, they have made me who I am.

### **Building Ties with Japan**

Now, I run the US operations of a Japanese policy institute, the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE), which is dedicated to strengthening US-Japan relations. JCIE is an independent nongovernmental and nonprofit organization, and we operate by working closely with a wide range of leaders from think tanks, nonprofits, government agencies, and businesses on both sides of the Pacific in order to promote dialogue and build cooperation on the pressing issues that face us in the Asian region and around the globe. In essence, much of our work is an effort to strengthen the nongovernmental underpinnings of US-Japan relations. To do this, we run parliamentary exchange programs, sponsor projects that convene policy experts from Japan, the United States, and other countries, and also promote civil society exchanges between NPOs, philanthropic organizations, and others at the national and grassroots level in both countries.

In doing this, I have noticed a very interesting phenomenon. This is that the vast majority of the emerging leaders and experts under the age of 45 who are working in fields that involve US-Japan relations are former JET Program participants. This seems to be true in government, policy research, business, academia, arts, and cultural exchange, and it is clear that these JET alumni have started to become valuable resources for US-Japan relations.

As one example, last year JCIE carried out a survey of US policy studies on Asia and found that there are only four influential senior scholars at Washington DC think tanks that spend the bulk of their day focusing on Japan. These are among the first people that American newspapers quote when something happens in US-Japan relations. Interestingly, two of these four first became acquainted with Japan through the JET Program or its predecessor program, the Monbusho English Fellows Program—Michael Green, who served in the Bush Administration, and Michael Auslin of the American Enterprise Institute.

Many of you know that there are three funding agencies in Japan and the United States that are dedicated solely to providing funding for nonprofits involved in US-Japan relations. These play a major role in promoting policy dialogue and grassroots exchange, so it is perhaps symbolic that, this July for the first time, a former JET Program participant was named as the head of one of these, the Japan US Friendship Commission.

Meanwhile, JET alumni are also rising to positions of prominence elsewhere throughout the US government. The staff of the US Embassy in Tokyo now includes roughly 20 JET alumni. Moreover, the current American Consul General in Okinawa is a JET graduate. And, in the United States, JET alumni have held important posts in the White House, the State Department, the Department of Defense, and practically every other major government agency.

As I mentioned, JCIE runs the US-Japan Parliamentary Exchange Program, so one of my job responsibilities is to recruit US Congressional members to travel to Japan to meet with Japanese leaders. To be honest, I have found this to be one of the most difficult parts of my job. Over the past decade, intense political competition in my country has made it harder for Congressional members to travel, while wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the rise of China mean that they are paying less attention to Japan. So, it is hard to convince them to put aside the time to come to Japan. But I have found one trick that works well. This is for me to find a JET alumnus in a Congressional office. If I can succeed in doing this, their enthusiasm and passion for Japan is often enough to convince their boss of the importance of dialogue with Japanese Diet members.

Before long, though, the links between the JET Program and US political leaders are likely to go beyond these leaders' policy advisors. In fact, it is probably only a matter of time before the first JET alumnus is elected to the US Congress. Two former participants ran in the general election for Congress last year, but unfortunately, they both lost close races. However, one of them is now running in a special election in November, and he is considered a favorite to win.

Of course, the JET alumni that are helping to strengthen ties with Japan are not just Americans. Former JETs from Australia, New Zealand, France, and many other countries are now rising up through the ranks of their respective foreign ministries. Others are heading student exchanges and running nonprofit organizations that introduce Japanese culture to their home countries. And some have gone on to success in the fields of art, theater, and music, drawing on influences from Japan and their home countries to create innovative new art that spans international borders. As one example, some 10 years ago, a Canadian JET founded the Sendai-based pop band Monkey Majik. With a string of big hits, they have become popular with youth inside and outside Japan, helping bring the rest of the world and Japan a little bit closer.

### **JET Participants Giving Back**

In Japan, the ceremony to become an adult is held for people who turn 20, but to be realistic, most people really begin give back to society after they are 25 years old or older. I suspect that the JET Program may be like this. In other words, with its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we are now just starting to reap the benefits of what has been invested over the years, and the long term contributions of the JET program are likely to grow and become more evident as time goes by.

The 3/11 disaster gives one example of how JET alumni are maintaining their connections with the country they consider to be their second home. On March 11, when they heard news of the disaster, JETs around the world were deeply shocked and wanted to do something to assist in whatever way they could. Many of you have heard about the two JET Program participants who lost their lives in Ishinomaki and Rikuzentakata, but what is less known is how their colleagues have mobilized to try to help affected communities throughout Tohoku.

Some of them quickly came back to Japan to volunteer in the disaster zone. For example, three days after the earthquake, Stuart Harris, a doctor who specializes in wilderness medicine led a team of doctors from Massachusetts General Hospital to Iwate, where he had lived as a JET Program participant. They travelled around the area providing emergency medical care to survivors in the freezing weather.

Current JET participants did similarly impressive things. One group from Akita Prefecture formed an organization they called VolunteerAKITA. They spent the first few months after the disaster raising funds to purchase fresh fruit, which they then delivered weekly to evacuation centers in Kessennuma and Ishinomaki. Now, they are carrying out a range of volunteer activities in the disaster zone.

I also want to mention another group, Smile Kids Japan, which was founded by a British JET alumnus to send JETs to volunteer at local orphanages to spend time with the kids and brighten their daily routine through games and study, like regular schoolchildren have. After the disaster, this group quickly mobilized to run relief supplies to the orphanages they work with, which had the added benefit of showing the kids that there are people who care and are thinking of them

While these JETs were on the ground providing direct aid in Tohoku, others began to raise funds for relief and recovery. A group of JET participants in Shimane Prefecture climbed Mt. Sanbe as part of a fundraiser, and they ended up raising 1,200,000 yen. Meanwhile, one JET participant who lives in Yamamoto Town in Miyagi Prefecture launched an appeal on his own to raise funds for schools in his city. By the time he had finished, he had collected 1,600,000 yen for them.

In the United States, JET alumni created a special fund to support disaster recovery, and they held dozens of fundraising events around the country. So far, nearly 6,000,000 yen (US\$75,000) has been collected for the JETAA-USA Fund. This will be donated to several NPOs so they can launch innovative education projects in Rikuzentakata to help students affected by the disaster.

This JETAA-USA Fund will have an important impact, but it is worth noting that many JET alumni went ahead with raising funds and sending them directly to Tohoku through a variety of other channels. We recently surveyed chapters worldwide and found that, altogether JET alumni groups and current JET participants around the globe have raised a total of roughly 38 million yen (US\$485,000) so far for the disaster.

JET alumni have been active in the disaster response in other ways, too. Behind the scenes, many have been playing important roles in the well known overseas organizations that are providing aid for Tohoku, and others have been mobilizing grassroots initiatives and sister city programs to try to help. One small group of JET alumni has even started translating the grant proposals of Japanese NPOs into English so that they can receive funding from outside Japan.

### **Toward the Future**

JET alumni have done this all not just because they feel they have an obligation to give back to the country that has given them so much, but also because they feel that Japan is their second home. Their response to 3/11 demonstrates the potential for the JET Program to continue to strengthen the ties between Japan and its partners around the world. It also gives further proof that the JET Program has been the most successful public diplomacy program in the world over the last 25 years.

This is why it is so important to continue the JET Program and, also, to look for ways to make it better and more sustainable. To be honest, many of us alumni have been worried by the fact that the numbers of slots in the program has decreased every single year for the past 10 years.

I hear that some prefectures find it more cost effective to hire English language teachers from outside contractors than to take part in the JET Program. This is a very understandable response given the tight budgets in many hard-pressed communities, and I think we all can sympathize with their plight. However, it seems that opportunities to forge close ties with their schools and local communities are much more limited for such teachers than for people on programs like JET that prioritize exchange, plus they are likely to receive less support in adjusting to and living in Japan. From my personal experience, I have the sense that they find it difficult to build the types of close ties with their schools and communities that made my time in Japan such a life-changing experience. And when they return home to their countries without a support system like the JET Alumni Association, I suspect these teachers find it much harder to maintain their connections to Japan. So, in the end, without the structure of the JET Program, the long-term benefits of these types of arrangements are probably significantly less than they could be otherwise.

I hope that there are creative ways to deal with these important challenges and to make the JET Program even more effective in the years ahead. I think that JET alumni and current participants should be able to come up with some useful proposals to make based on their own experiences, and I hope they will be encouraged to share these with the central government and local communities that bear the burden of operating the program. Hopefully, some ways can be found to reduce the burden of running the program.

And it is encouraging to see new initiatives such as the so-called “reverse JET Program” to send Japanese teachers abroad. It seems only healthy for these exchange programs to be more equal and two-way in nature. Going even further, I would hope there is some way for other countries such as my own to support exchanges with Japan as generously as Japan has done for foreign citizens. The JET Program has certainly shown the wisdom of doing this.

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When I was asked to give a title for this speech, the first phrase that popped into my head was, “Thank you, Japan!” That seemed too trite, too simplistic, so I rejected it. But it captures the overwhelming feeling that I have when I reflect upon how participation in the JET Program has changed my life.

In a broader sense, though, I feel that the JET Program has succeeded in enriching all of our nations—Japan, the United Kingdom, Korea, the United States, and each of the 57 other countries that have been involved. Going beyond its important impact on Japanese education, it has helped to nurture a generation of emerging leaders around the world who cherish their ties to Japan and who can build on these in contributing to their own countries, to Japan, and to the entire global community. We talk about “soft power” as an increasingly important force in international affairs, and it is clear that the JET Program has been a triumph of soft power. These first 25 years have been an extraordinary start, and I am sure that next 25 years will be even more successful. Former JETs, myself included, who have benefited so much from this invaluable experience, hope that the next generation of participants can continue to build upon what has come before, and we hope that we can help in some way to making the JET Program even more meaningful.

Of course, in the 25 years since its establishment, the context in which the JET Program operates has changed significantly. This makes it especially timely for CLAIR and the three ministries to be hosting this symposium at this moment. I am sure that the participants—from many backgrounds and many different perspectives—will be able to share their views on how to further improve the JET Program. And if these can lead to action, I believe that the JET Program will be even more successful and more meaningful.