



Newsletter

June 2012

Hi fellow Jet Alumni

Hisashiburi! It has been a long time since our last newsletter and I apologise for the delay – it has been a hectic start to the year. That said, 2012 is also shaping up to be a good year in many ways, and I hope most of you feel the same way. There is also a lot on the go at the moment JET and JETAA wise, and as you will see from the newsletter, there are lots of events to look forward to and quite a few ways that you can choose to get more involved in our Chapter. I hope that you will grab them and that together we can continue to grow and improve JETAASA year on year!

That said, please drop me a mail if you have any comments or suggestions or if you would like to get more involved in any way – I would really value your input.

Till then, I will see on Facebook (just search for JETAA South Africa).

Ja ne!

Nicky (jetaasa@yahoo.com)

PS: A note on our email database: Please bear with us, the system is nowhere near perfect. We still get loads of returned mails every time, and also lots of mails from people asking why they are being emailed when they are in Japan or England or in America. With over 400 of us, it's tough to keep track of everyone (especially when many of you have moved a lot since leaving Japan) so if you do receive an email but are no longer in the country, please just delete it with good grace and a smile. And if you do change your email address please let us know so that we can update your details so that we don't lose you in cyberspace. Thanks!



Join us For **LUNCH** and **MOVIE** in Johannesburg



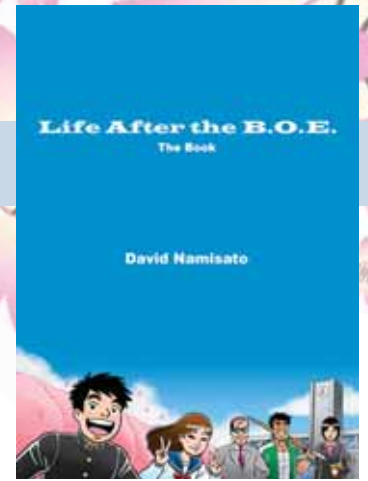
On Saturday, 2nd June, we will be hosting a JETAASA social get together in Johannesburg. The festivities will start at 11h45 at Yamato Japanese Restaurant (www.yamato.co.za) in Illovo, for lunch before moving to the Gordan Institute of Business Science (26 Melville Road, Illovo), for the screening of the heart warming Japanese movie *Wanko: The Story of Me, My Family and My Dog* at 14h00.

We would love as many of you as possible to join us and you are welcome to come for the whole event, or just for the lunch or the movie. We will also be inviting this year's bunch of newly selected JETs, so it will be a great opportunity to chat to them and give them some ideas of what they can expect from their time in Japan.

If you are keen to join us for lunch (or lunch AND the movie) please RSVP to jetaasa@yahoo.com by the 27th of May. If you are only interested in coming for the movie, please RSVP directly to info@embjapan.org.za, also by the 27th of May. We hope to see you there.

Life After the **BOE**

Canadian ex-JET David Namisato's book of hilarious and poignant cartoons (entitled *Life After the BOE*) about life in Japan and on the JET Programme is a wonderfully *natsukashii* memento for any JET and is now available for purchase on www.amazon.com. Buy it for yourself to relive your favourite JET memories or for a JET friend as a cool Japan related present.



The Sempai System

Last year we had great success with the implementation of our inaugural "Sempai System" whereby we paired each of the new South African 2011 JETs with a sempai in their city who could act as a mentor and advisor in the weeks leading up to their departure in July. The feedback we received from both the JETs and the sempais was extremely positive – many of the JETs found the sempai's advice and insight invaluable and reassuring, while the many of the sempais enjoyed being able to relive their time in Japan by sharing their memories with the next generation of JETs. The Sempai System also helped to ease the burden on the staff at the Japanese Embassy in Pretoria who noticed a marked decline in the number of worried emails and questioning phone calls they received from the new JETs.

As a result, we would like to continue the programme this year. We are still waiting for final confirmation from the embassy but have been told that there should be approximately 30 new JET participants this year, a third of which are from Gauteng, a third from Cape Town and the other third a mixture of participants from the other provinces.

If you are keen to be a sempai this year, please send me an email with your contact details and your city to jetaasa@yahoo.com.



Spring Festival

Last year, thanks to the kindness of the new Kocho sensei at the Japanese School in Johannesburg, JETAASA members were invited to attend the school's annual Spring Festival for the first time. As well as revelling in the beauty of the school's sakura trees, we also got to feast on *yaki soba* and *okonomiyaki* and play Japanese games.

This year, the Japanese Embassy is investigating the possibility of JETAASA hosting their own stand at the festival. This, however, will only be possible if I receive significant interest from other members who are willing to participate. The festival will be held in October and if we proceed, we will have to set up a committee to brainstorm ideas of what we can do/sell (ie play English language games or sell traditionally South African food). Any money raised could then be donated to a local or Japan-based charity of our choice. I think this would be a wonderful opportunity to get actively involved with the Japanese community in South Africa and also to do some good at the same time. Please send an email to jetaasa@yahoo.com if you are interested.

Japanese TV

If you still crave a regular "Japan Fix" satellite provider Top TV has now included NHK World in its basic Variety package (R99 per month), which means that you get to hear all the ins and outs and newsworthy events from Japan daily, in English! Visit www.toptv.co.za for more info.

HELP NEEDED!

As many of you are aware, JETAASA is a volunteer organisation and relies solely on the willingness of members to provide their time and effort – not only to attend events but also to help with the planning and implementing of them.

We have always been constrained by the fact that the South African chapter (and its members) are spread all over the country, and up until now most of our events have been in Gauteng purely because we tend to partner with the Japanese Embassy in Pretoria in supporting their events. But it has been our hope for the past few years to roll out social events in other parts of the country as well. So PLEASE, if you live in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth or Durban and would like to be more actively involved in JETAASA and in implementing events in your area, please drop me a mail at jetaasa@yahoo.com.

Likewise, if you live in Pretoria or Johannesburg, and would like to become more involved in the behind the scenes work of JETAASA, please also drop me a mail. A group is always better than an individual and I could really do with the help!

2011 JETAA International Meeting

At the end of October last year, JETAA International held a meeting in Tokyo which was attended by representatives from JETAA chapters from around the world. It was felt that it was important for JETAA to meet during the 25th anniversary year of the JET Programme and in this regard, I am happy to report that despite worries to the contrary, the Japanese government has no intention at this stage to scrap the JET Programme. They are, however, in the process of assessing the effectiveness of the programme, and we were gratified that – for the first time ever – they welcomed JETAA input and insight into the debate. JETAA representatives were even invited to meet with the Director General of the Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau who reaffirmed his department's commitment to maintain and improve the JET Programme.



Another major focus of the meeting was the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami and JETAA efforts around the world to contribute to the rescue and rehabilitation efforts following the disaster. All of the JETAA International Chapters (including our own) played their part in raising a significant amount of money which was donated to relief efforts in the Tohoku region. It was truly heartwarming to see how well loved Japan and its people are, and just how much former JETs are willing to help what was once their home.

The delegates at the international conference also felt a strong desire to contribute to recovery efforts on a personal level while we were in Japan, and we were extremely fortunate to be able to form part of a group which travelled to the badly damaged town of Rikuzen Takata in Iwate to volunteer for a day. We were set to work clearing debris from a rice paddy. It was hard and muddy work, but so deeply rewarding. When one looks at the sheer extent of the damage inflicted by the disaster, it is easy to get despondent and feel like the rebuilding of these towns and homes is an insurmountable challenge. However, the survivors we met and the stories we heard from the other volunteers (many of whom came every weekend – some from as far a field as Tokyo) made us realise that the power of determination and team work can literally move mountains. It was a deeply moving and humbling experience, and one which I will not soon forget.



Coming Up

28th July

2012 South African JET Participants depart for Japan

5th – 7th October

Japanese Film Festival to be screened in Pretoria

13th & 14th October

Japanese Film Festival to be screened in Cape Town

20th & 21st October

Japanese Film Festival to be screened in Johannesburg

Going Home Again

Kesennuma Revisited

By Nicky Furniss



Standing with my former ekaiwa student Ryouko, on the tiny hill where she and her neighbours sought refuge from the rising waters of the tsunami

[Late last year, I had the opportunity (one which I am so grateful for) to be able to go back to Japan, and in particular to my Japanese home town of Kesennuma (one of the fishing towns in Miyagi Ken that was badly damaged by the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami). It was a heart wrenching, and initially traumatic, homecoming, but after spending time reconnecting with old friends and hearing their stories, I left with a sense of peace and acceptance and the relief that they and Kesennuma would be ok. Below is an article I wrote about this homecoming after I returned.]

They say that you can never go home again. This is especially true when your home has been ravaged by a devastating earthquake and tsunami.

The city of Kesennuma lies on the eastern coast of Northern Japan. On 11th March 2011 large parts of it were destroyed by a powerful tsunami, while others were consumed by fires triggered by the 8.9 magnitude earthquake that preceded it. I spent three very happy years teaching in Kesennuma and it was impossible to reconcile the pictures on my television screen with the fond memories I had of my second home. Not least of all, because it would take almost a month to contact everyone I knew still living there and to find them all, thankfully, alive.

Eight months later, when the opportunity arose for me to return to Japan, I jumped at the chance.

Driving to Kesennuma was deceptive. The road was bordered by beautiful paddies of golden rice and trees tinged with Autumnal colours. When I hit the coast, however, the first signs of the disaster became manifest. Beaches previously sheltered by pine



Large portions of the badly hit suburb of Shishiori are permanently flooded, making rebuilding here an unlikely possibility

trees were laid bare, while fields were filled with graveyards of twisted cars, piled on top of each other like building blocks. I passed through a small village where many of the houses were just carcasses of what they had once been. With whole walls ripped off, many looked like cross sections of a doll's house, complete with battered furniture and curtains.

As I finally turned into Kesennuma, I was surprised to see Mos Burger still doing a roaring trade and what seemed like business as usual in the many convenience stores and clothing shops that litter Kesennuma's main retail area. For a fleeting moment I allowed myself to hope that I had overestimated the extent of

Cars, boats and debris lie scattered among the remnants of destroyed buildings in Shishiori, Kesennuma



A happy reunion with the 5 and 6 nenseis of Tsukidate Elementary School, who still remember me from when I taught them as 1 and 2 nenseis



This is all that remains of Ryouko's house in Katahama, Kesennuma. The small hill in the distance is the only thing that saved her and her neighbours on the day of the tsunami



Kesennuma's damage. But just as quickly, I turned a corner and was faced with an apocalyptic landscape wiped virtually clean, save for the odd ruin of a house still clinging to the earth. This city was clearly no longer the same one I used to know.

Later I met an old friend, Nobuko Murikami, to visit some of the schools that I used to work at. She was in her car when the earthquake hit. It slid precariously across the road, while the lamp posts overhead "wobbled like candy". When the violent shaking finally stopped Nobuko raced back to her home town of Karakuwa, about 15 minutes up the coast, and persuaded her parents to abandon their home and move to higher ground.

It turned out to be a fortuitous decision as the family watched from above as their house was washed away by the tsunami. Had she not gone back for her parents, she believes that they may have not have left. It is thoughts like these that have made her circumspect about losing all of her material possessions: "I realised that I didn't really need all of the things that I had, because I didn't miss most of them when they were gone."

Thanks to its inland location, Tsukidate Elementary School was spared the horrific fate of many of the city's coastal areas. The children, however, have not remained unaffected by the disaster, as the Principal, Mr Yamamoto, explained to us. In the days following the tsunami, the school's hall was used as a base by volunteer fire fighters from Tokyo. Through their daily interaction with the volunteers, many of the students have since expressed an interest in pursuing similar humanitarian-centred careers themselves one day.

The coastal elementary school of Urashima also avoided the waves due to its position on top of a hill. The same cannot be said for the houses of many of its pupils, however. I remember the school field filled with students skipping rope and playing soccer. Now it has mushroomed with temporary prefab houses; thousands of which can be seen all over Kesennuma wherever there is available flat ground – usually on school fields. These houses, as small as they are, offer some modicum of normality and a sense of privacy – something which cannot be underestimated by anyone who has been forced to live for months with hundreds of other homeless survivors in school gyms and halls.

Five of the students at Urashima lost their homes and are currently living in these temporary shelters, a short walk from their classrooms. For them and many members of the community, the school has become the centre of their world. In the aftermath of the tsunami, the area was completely cut off by flood waters. Many sought shelter in the school, where supplies were eventually airlifted to, and now continue to live on its field. But several families have also chosen to move away and, in a horrible twist of fate, this has put the school at jeopardy.

Before the disaster, 24 students attended the school. Now, however, only 11 students are currently enrolled here. As a result, the Board of Education is considering closing it down. Mr Hayashizaka, the principal, told us that after the disaster, it took several months for the students here to play again. Now with the possibility of the closure of their school, it seems the sound of children laughing and playing jump rope on the Urashima Elementary School field may never be heard again.

As we drove back from Urashima, we passed through Shishiori, arguably one of the city's hardest hit areas. What was once a bustling suburb is now a ghost town of twisted metal, exposed foundations and empty shells of houses and shops. The sheer magnitude of the earthquake caused the coastline here to subside – in some areas by as much as two metres. As a result, the area is permanently flooded with stagnant water that gives off a constant smell of rot and decay.

Shishiori is eerily quiet these days, save for the sounds of exposed metal flapping in the breeze or the occasional sinister caw of a crow. Despite the many twisted lamp poles, beached boats

During my time in Kesennuma, I was constantly humbled by how resilient the people there are. Here, in my favourite picture, Ryouko laughs at her joke about turning her now exposed bathtub into a rotenburo



The stranded fishing boat, the No. 18 Kyotokumar, remains beached outside Minami Kesennuma Train Station as a constant reminder of the devastating events of 11th March 2011



The suburb of Shishiori is eerily quiet these days, save for the sound of cars driving past and the occasional caw of a crow

and shredded houses that still litter the area, it is remarkable – when you compare it to pictures of the area immediately after the disaster – just how much has been done in the intervening months. It is unlikely, however, that those that once lived here will ever want to return, and even if they did, whether it will even be possible with the land so permanently waterlogged.

One landmark in Shishiori still attracts visitors, however. Towering three storeys above the road (and a good 15 minute walk from the harbour) stands a large fishing trawler, the No. 18 Kyotokumar. When the flood waters eventually subsided, it came to rest outside what was once Minami Kesennuma train station and has already become something of a tourist attraction. Visitors can often be seen walking around the gigantic ship, taking photos and saying: “Sugei!”. The city is even considering turning it into a permanent memorial to the disaster, which seems fitting considering Kesennuma’s love-hate relationship with the sea.

The next day, I met 70-year-old Ryouko and her niece Reiko, both previous students of mine. Ryouko had often invited me to her Japanese style house and was very proud of her expansive vegetable garden. Now, all that remains of the suburb of Katahama is empty ground littered with shards of pottery and plastic. When we eventually located the remains of Ryouko’s house, she led me from one empty foundation square to another pointing out what used to be the living room, a bedroom, the kitchen. When she reached the bathroom – still complete with its tiled in bathtub – she leant over it, turned to me and said that perhaps she could still use it for open air bathing. She threw back her head and laughed. I was amazed, once again, at the sheer resilience of human nature.

Ryouko was in her home when the earthquake struck, and like

many of the inhabitants of North Eastern Japan, she knew instantly that there would be a tsunami. So she walked to a nearby hill and waited there with 33 of her neighbours for the water to come. Come it did, and in volumes none of them expected. The group huddled around the tiny shrine at the top of the hill and watched helplessly as the level of the water crept higher and higher. It was lapping at their feet by the time it stopped. Then it started to snow.

Ryouko led us up the tiny hill and rang the bell of the small wooden shrine which she believes saved their lives. From the summit you can see Oshima Island, which sits in the middle of Kesennuma Bay, as well as the city of Kesennuma curving around to the left. On 11th March Ryouko said that the sky burned orange the entire night as they watched Oshima and Kesennuma burn. The next morning, after a terrifying and freezing night, the water eventually receded and they were able to walk out, homeless, but alive.

Ryouko and her family moved into their new house on New Year’s Day 2012. Reiko sent me happy pictures of them in their new living room. Now she tells me that Ryouko has already started to plant a new vegetable garden. In November, when she showed me around the incomplete framework of her new house, I remarked that, by Japanese standards at least, she was building a very big house. “Why do you need all these bedrooms?” I asked her. “So that I can have my family and friends around me,” she replied.

They say you can never go home again, and it is true that the Kesennuma of today is very different from the Kesennuma I remember; cosmetically anyway. In terms of the people of Kesennuma – the city’s heart and soul, its strength and hope – my home is just as it has always been, just stronger. 🌸