

Mercy exchange program offers 'mini-visit' to Japan

By Sean McNamara
Freelance writer

"Kon ban wa!"
"Come boon what?"
"Kon ban wa."
"Con bonn wah."
"K-o-n b-a-n w-a."
"Kon ban wa."

So went the first lesson in Japanese for students at Our Lady of Mercy High School. At first, the strange sounds of Japanese were unpronounceable for Mercy students, but they had learned to say "Tonight is a very good night" along with other Japanese phrases by the end of the class.

And somewhere between broken English and even poorer Japanese came understanding.

For Mizuho Ishidmi, a junior at Tokoha High School in Shizuoka, Japan, the greatest similarity with her American hosts is being a fan of The New Kids on the Block, a musical group. Her most prized souvenir from the United States is a compact disc by the group.

Junko Akiyama, also a junior, says she likes American pizza as much as her hosts do because it is "thicker" than the pizza in Japan.

Both Ishidmi and Akiyama are among 15 Japanese students on a three-week visit to Mercy as part of a student-exchange program. Each March, between 15 and 20 students from Tokoha travel to Mercy. Every other year, students from Mercy go to Tokoha during their summer vacation.

"It is very important for the younger generation to come to this country — just to see what it is like," according to Akiko Kimaya, an English teacher who is one of the group's chaperons making her third trip to Mercy. Her first trip came 10 years ago as a student in the program.

In preparation for the trip, the Tokoha students met daily during their lunch

periods to learn English and to practice the songs and dances they would perform for their hosts. Since they arrived two weeks ago, they have demonstrated traditional Japanese dance and song and Judo.

"People almost get a mini-trip to Japan," said Barbara Daniels, a Mercy teacher and exchange-program coordinator. "It's not just a matter of having a friend from a foreign country visit. Our guests are very gracious with what they bring and are incredibly sharing with us."

Heidi Schoene, a junior, is one of this year's hosts. She traveled to Japan last summer as part of the program. "The biggest thing you learn is all about their culture. It's also a very big lesson in communication," she explained.

One of the program's main goals for the Japanese students is to learn English. While their teachers can help translate for them during the day, they are "on their own" when they go home with their hosts, Daniels said.

The Mercy teacher added that it is difficult for the students to learn the academic content of the classes they attend, but the immersion in the language helps teach them English.

Schoene said it was easier for her to travel to Japan than it is for the Japanese students who traveled to the U.S. because her hosts could speak English. Most American high schools do not offer courses in Japanese, while many Japanese schools teach English.

One of the other differences the Japanese students find in America is in the length of the school day and week: six-hour days five days a week as compared to six days a week for eight hours a day in Japan.

"Everything is so different from our system. Students here are more opinionated. In Japan, classrooms are more crowded and there is less of a chance for student opinion," said Kimaya.

For students who hope to go on to college in Japan, the pressure in high school is tremendous. Under the Japanese system, a college degree is practically the only way to obtain a good job, and competition for the few open spots at universities is intense. Students hoping to go on to college attend an extra two hours of study after school called Juku, or "cram school."

Coming during Japan's spring break, the trip provided relief from the pressure —

once the first-day jitters were over. "At first (the Japanese students) were confused and surprised," Kimaya said. "There are so many choices here. There are less in Japan." Mercy students were "eager to connect" with the Japanese girls who progressively became "exuberant and outgoing," Daniels explained.

"We're becoming really good friends," Schoene said of her guest. "I have a new friend all the way across the world."

Aquinas Institute

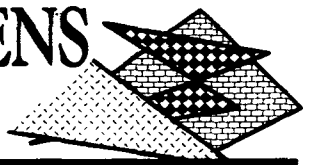
Where would you like to study?

Dan Provenzano, sophomore:

I would go to Italy because I'm taking Italian II in high school. I've always wanted to go to Italy. I want to learn how their culture works and about their customs — plus, I've never been outside of the United States. I want to study to be a doctor, so maybe I would go to medical school there.



AS TEENS SEE IT



Adina Gould, junior:

I would probably go to France to learn about their culture. I've always wanted to know how they are different from the United States — their different ways of doing things. I would also like to see the museums and the Eiffel Tower.



Aimee Erwin, junior:

I would want to go to Germany and Ireland. I want to go to Germany because my ancestors are there and because of the (Berlin) Wall just breaking down. I would go to Ireland because my mother's ancestors are there and because it would be a really neat country to go to. (Rock group) U2 is always talking about the problems there, so I would like to go over to help them out.



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