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Foreign volunteer group helps brewers to rebuild

By MELINDA JOE

Earlier this month, a group of 18 international volunteers participating in a cultural exchange program got a crash course in sake production at breweries in Miyagi and Iwate prefectures. The program, organized by Britain-based student organizations Action for Japan UK and the Japan Affairs Forum, ran Sept 11-25 and included tours of five breweries, as well as some hands-on sake-making experience.

For the first four days of the program, participants worked alongside brewery staff members and Japanese volunteers to wash, shovel and steam rice at Nizawa Shuzo, the maker of Hakurakusei sake, in the village of Sanbongi, Osaki City, Miyagi Prefecture.

"We did everything from A to Z — big jobs like making the *kōji* (the enzymatic catalyst that facilitates the breakdown of starches into sugar) and grunt work like cleaning plums from the bottom of a vat of *umeshu* (plum liqueur)," said sake educator and blogger Timothy Sullivan, who traveled from New York City to join the group. "It was exhausting, but the people at the brewery were incredibly kind."



Helping hands: Volunteers work the rice at Nizawa Shuzo. TIMOTHY SULLIVAN PHOTO

Like a number of breweries across the northeastern Tohoku region, Nizawa Shuzo sustained severe damage during the March 11 earthquake and tsunami; the building collapsed, and its foundations were wrecked beyond repair. The 148-year-old brewery was forced to move its operations to a new facility about an hour away from its original location, and the volunteers helped with the brewing while the equipment was being transferred.

The volunteer project was the brainchild of Alexander Parsons, an energetic political-policy student at the London School of Economics, who became interested in sake while traveling and studying in Japan for a year. After creating the Japan Affairs Forum with a group of concerned students, he proposed a trip to Tohoku that would shed light on small industries that have been affected by the disaster. Over the course of four months, the sake-related project was developed through a series of connections in England and Japan that brought Parsons together with Iwao Nizawa, the president of Nizawa Shuzo.

"The primary objective of this outreach program is to build a relationship with (these breweries) and to keep their needs present in people's minds," he explained.

Nizawa Shuzo was the first stop on a two-week tour around the coast of northeastern Japan. In the small town of Rikuzentakata, Iwate Prefecture, the group visited Yasuhiko Konno, president of Suisen Shuzo, a brewery whose dramatic destruction was witnessed by millions of viewers on Japanese television.

Despite the heavy atmosphere, though, the group found several glimmers of hope. While Konno and his team continue to face incredible obstacles, Suisen Shuzo plans to restart sake production next month. Konno and his team have arranged to borrow the facilities of rival brewery Iwate Meijo Corporation in nearby Ichinoseki for the next three years.

The Japan Affairs Forum is planning another project that will bring 80 students from the University of Delhi to do general volunteer work in isolated areas around Iwate Prefecture this winter.

"The economic impact of this trip hasn't been huge, but we feel that we've made a significant emotional contribution," he said.

Sullivan noted that the emotional impact of the trip on volunteers has been equally great: "I was here during the quake and left Japan about 10 days after. I felt so helpless then. After coming and bearing witness to this, I want to do everything I can from New York to make sure that people don't forget about these brewers."

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