Montana’s Continuing Commitment to Japan

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By Ian Marquand for the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center

Mike Mansfield would be proud.

Proud of how gracefully the US women’s soccer team accepted its second place finish in the World Cup. Mike would have been disappointed that his country lost. But he would have felt warmth and affection for the Japanese champions and for the nation they represent. A nation that needed good news, four months after its triple tragedy of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis.

Those of us following the disasters could see the toll they took on land and property. We could only imagine the mental and emotional toll they took on the Japanese people, even those far from the disaster zone.

Mike would be proud of Montana’s response to the disaster over these last four months. He’d be proud of Talia Harris of Billings, who teaches English in our sister state of Kumamoto, Japan. And who traveled many hundreds of miles to volunteer in one of the areas hardest---hit by the tsunami.

Mike would be proud that his alma mater, the University of Montana, began reaching out to its Japanese students almost immediately after the disaster, creating a special assistance fund for students impacted by the tragedy.

He’d be proud that attendees at UM’s annual International Food and Culture Festival put more than a thousand dollars into collection boxes, some of which went to the university’s fund and some to the Japanese Red Cross.
He’d be proud of Missoula restaurants and the Missoula Children’s Film Festival, which held special events or made contributions to the relief effort.

He’d be proud that for the past two weeks, Missoula played host to 15 high school students from Sendai, the largest city in the disaster area. They came here through a private education program to study English. I met them this past weekend and, while we didn’t talk a lot about the disaster, I learned that their school had been damaged. So had some of their homes. I learned that Sendai continues to live with electricity shortages and worries about radiation. But on that afternoon, I saw young people just having fun. And I saw Montanans once again display the hospitality I’ve seen so often.

Of course, the effort to help Japan has gone beyond Missoula. Like the event in Bozeman in March that raised an astonishing twelve thousand dollars for tsunami relief. And a more recent fundraiser in Kalispell in which the Japanese community partnered with Flathead Valley Community College.

Mike would be proud of those efforts—and of new ones. Currently, the Missoula-based Japan Friendship Club is in the midst of a fundraiser that will conclude on August fifth. And this fall, we can expect more efforts at the university to help current and future students from the disaster area.

You can see more of what the University is doing by going to its website and simply adding a backslash and the word “Japan” to the main web address.

You’ll see a beautiful poster that’s a centerpiece of that effort. And you’ll learn how you can help. You also can keep up on community efforts by visiting the Japan Friendship Club’s page on Facebook.
I thought of Mike again this past week, when Montana’s sister state relationship with Kumamoto Prefecture reached its 29th anniversary. It’s a relationship Mike helped bring about. And that has remained durable, even through difficult economic times. In the coming weeks, Montana will welcome a delegation from Kumamoto. And next year, both states will celebrate 30 years of friendship.

Mike Mansfield would be proud.

I’m Ian Marquand for the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at the University of Montana. UM’s gateway to the east. You can find us simply by going to the university’s website, www.umt.edu, then adding a back-slash and the word Mansfield.