

Building Playgrounds, Opportunities, Memories

Hands On Tokyo takes on an important role as community provider, by Ulara Nakagawa

Upside down, blood rushing to my head, I may not have been getting any smarter, but I was certainly having fun. There is a picture in an old photo album kept at my parents' home that captures the moment perfectly: my childhood best friend Lauren and I, red-faced, and grinning from ear to ear, hanging by our knees from the monkey bars in our elementary school playground.

Back then, it was on those slides and bars, jungle gyms, and tire swings that many of our precious friendships and memories were built upon. Now, may it be cocktails at the bar, social networking sites, or the office water cooler that help cement our adult moments into (sometimes blurry) memories, for some reason, they just don't seem hold the same meaningful-

ness. What exactly is it that makes our adult pastimes so much less poignant than our childhood ones? Why does that photograph of those monkey bars evoke an almost painful longing and nostalgia in me ten times that of another taken last year, at a (totally different grown-up kind of) bar?

Maybe Deva Hirsch can help with an answer. Deva is the founding president and current board member of Hands On Tokyo (HOT), the city's first bilingual volunteer matching organization started in the winter of 2006. Last year, one of Hands On Tokyo's major volunteer projects was to rebuild a playground at a home for children who cannot live with their parents. Looking back on the experience, Hirsch says, "you and I may have run on grass at that age...(but) for these babies, it is the first time they have been in a swing in their lives and to feel the grass on their feet. Different



Volunteers from Hands On Tokyo building for fun times and having fun times building.

weekly volunteer projects that strive to provide that added value, and cultivate quality relationships with such groups as Second Harvest Japan, Special Olympics-Tokyo, and children's and senior's homes in Tokyo. Volunteers of all ages are needed, for which experience is not at all necessary, language is not an issue, and flexible schedules are a given. At Hands On Tokyo, several unique policies are also in place that really place value on the volunteer. Hirsch tells me that one of HOT's core missions is to provide a good experience for the volunteer because, "we want to turn people onto volunteering so that their whole life they will continue to think it is good to give back to their community, wherever they are living."

These volunteer-centric points include: on-site health insurance, a bilingual project coordinator present at each site to provide volunteers with travel directions; guidance and orientation for the specific project; and a project pre-test which sends HOT board members out to each and every project site to put themselves in the volunteers' shoes beforehand to be able to best prepare and equip the volunteer for the project.

There is also a need for sponsors. For Hands On Tokyo, it is the generous assistance of such groups as State Street Bank, Capmark, Hitachi Consulting, Elliott Advisers, Robert Half, Shinsei Bank and others, along with the hard work of their dedicated volunteers that uphold their seven ongoing projects and made last year's playground renovation possible. In its first year, HOT was able to give the community back 1,200 volunteer hours and aspires to surpass that number in 2008.

Going back to that old photograph of the monkey bars, I wonder how it might be to have a black space in its place in the photo album at my parents' house. Then, I wonder what it might be like to have a black space in my childhood memories, of where it should have been. And I am thankful for wonderful organizations such as Hands On Tokyo, and their dedicated people who strive to ensure that such things will never happen.

For more information Hands On Tokyo, contact Yumiko Tategami on 03-5404-3563, info@handsontokyo.org or see www.handsontokyo.org

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textures for kids are so important...if you don't have that kind of experience you are just not going to be as developed." In telling me this she explains why childhood play is so significant, because it literally helps to form us: "what we are trying to do is to give those children some of those things...to help them develop skills and confidence, and develop the way other children are able to. If we don't present them with those opportunities, how can we expect that to happen?" And it becomes clear that such opportunities can come in the form of the very monkey bars or swings that I so fondly remember.

Ongoing Support

Hence, Hands on Tokyo will hold another playground rebuilding project this year, as part of their large scale one-day volunteering event called 'Day of Service' in the fall. However, it is important to make clear that Hands On Tokyo is *not* about sporadic service. Says Hirsch, "we have an ongoing relationships with the homes...we are there every month. It's not like 'here you go...goodbye.' We really want to be a partner. That is really what Hands On Tokyo is trying to do...to be the value added."

The organization currently has seven ongoing

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