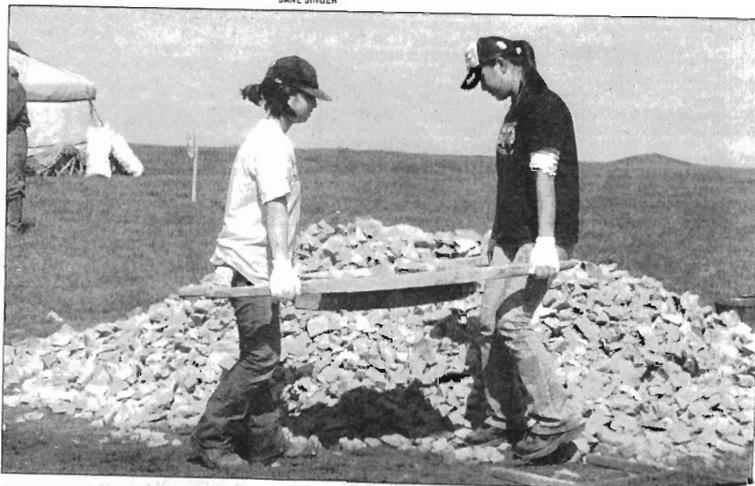


A GOOD FOUNDATION



Left: Volunteer Haruko Kawano poses with canine friend Bokka at Animal Refuge Kansai in Nose, Osaka Prefecture. Far left and below: Habitat for Humanity volunteers who traveled from Japan help build a house in Erdenet, Mongolia.



Volunteering: Give a little, get back a lot

'I think that all of the team members now have a much deeper understanding of their place in the world.'

MARK HABER

Volunteer house builder

By JANE SINGER

Contributing Writer

Some Tokyo families soaked up the sun at beach resorts in Bali or Phuket last summer. Not Mark Haber. This seven-year American resident of Tokyo, his wife Chiyo, and his 15-year-old daughter Sarah spent five days in Erdenet, Mongolia, where they poured concrete foundations, fabricated wooden roof supports and erected walls for eight new homes, alongside the Mongolian families who will live in them.

The Habers are one of a growing number of families who have participated in voluntary community service projects and have found themselves better off for the experience.

Said Haber of his trip, sponsored by the Tokyo office of the service group Habitat for Humanity International, "The combination of a shared family experience, doing something useful for others, plus a trip to an exotic locale, was very attractive to us."

Families living in Japan often find that children, busy with long class hours and commutes, cram school, club activities and weekend sports practice, have little or no exposure to people of varying ages, ethnicity or economic status.

While Japan lacks the extremes of poverty and wealth seen in other parts of Asia, some parents see materialism as the dominant societal force here, confounding attempts to get children to value more than acquisition of the latest computer game.

Many parents believe that community service can help inspire children with the desire to serve others, while building their confidence and teaching them about the greater world. And when

families volunteer together, they strengthen mutual ties and confirm shared values.

As for Haber, his daughter recruited seven of her school friends and formed a project team, along with his wife and several of her work contacts.

"For the first few hours on the building site, the girls lifted one stone at a time or tapped gently at flooring nails," Haber said.

"Very quickly, however, they started trying out more demanding tasks and were excited about being able to carry them out. One team of four girls, after some initial guidance from a local mason, built a chimney. When it was finished, the mason told them that he was impressed with their workmanship. Was there a change in their attitude, behavior and maturity? You bet," Haber said. "I think that all of the team members now have a much deeper understanding of their place in the world."

Volunteering closer to home

Of course, families need not travel overseas to help others; several volunteer groups in Japan also accept participation from family members including those who speak little or no Japanese.

In the Kansai area, teenage volunteers are welcome at Animal Refuge Kansai (ARK), a group that rescues abandoned or neglected pets and finds them new homes.

At ARK's open-air animal shelter in Nose, Osaka Prefecture, 30 paid employees and dozens of regular volunteers care for and nurture some 400 dogs, cats and rabbits.

Well-tended floral planters front long rows of vinyl and wire kennels that snake up the mountainside at the 3,300-square-meter site, where the mountain air reverberates with dog barks and friendly geriatric

dogs amble by, happy to be stroked by staff members and visitors.

Kyoto University student Haruko Kawano volunteered at ARK after learning about the huge number of abandoned pets in Japan from a campus guest speaker.

"Our family dog died last year, so I thought this would be a great opportunity to help out while spending time with dogs," she said.

After a 15-minute video on dog-walking etiquette, Kawano was provided with small strips of cheese, a harness and lead and a plastic baggie, then introduced to her charge, a reticent 13-year-old mid-sized mixed-breed named Bokka.

After a short detour to sniff some promising underbrush, Kawano and Bokka took off on a brisk 20-minute stroll up and down a tree-lined asphalt road, interrupted by lots of petting, snacks and pauses to allow other dog-walkers and their charges to pass.

All the dogs at ARK are walked twice daily, and frequently brushed and played with, which helps to socialize them for rehoming, ARK's main objective.

The Tokyo chapter of ARK also seeks foster families to care for pets on a short-term basis.

"Fostering is an ideal solution for foreign embassy families or others in Tokyo for limited stays who want to keep pets at home," ARK founder Elizabeth Oliver said.

Meanwhile, Hands On Tokyo, a bilingual volunteer clearinghouse, sponsors several weekend projects for teams of four to 15 volunteers. Even families with young children can join in visits to a local senior citizens' home.

Other projects, such as leading Special Olympics sports activities and teaching English to the blind, are open to families with children

over the age of 10.

Language is no barrier to participation, and no specific skills or experience are required.

Program Coordinator Yumiko Tategami said: "Kids really enjoy being with the seniors, and often learn things like origami from them. It's great for them to see their parents helping out, and the visits often spur families to later talk together about grandparents and old age."

She added that the senior residents might even serve as substitute grandparents for children whose grandparents are living abroad.

Another volunteer group that is popular among Tokyo's expatriate families is a food bank, Second Harvest Japan.

Second Harvest volunteers collect surplus or unneeded food, cook hot meals at the group's warehouse and distribute them to homeless residents of Tokyo's Ueno Park each Saturday.

Executive Director Charles McJilton said that although parents may worry about their children's exposure to homeless men, most young volunteers are very positive about the experience: "Kids ask frank questions and talk with the homeless. When children learn that if you don't have access to a shower you will smell, and if you lack an address it's difficult to get a job, they start to understand that these people are not unlike us."

Habitat for Humanity Japan can be reached at 03-6304-2543 or <www.habitatjp.org>
Animal Refuge Kansai at 072-737-0712 or <www.arkbark.net>
Hands On Tokyo at 03-5404-3563 or <www.handsontokyo.org>
Second Harvest Japan at 03-3838-3827 or <www.secondharvestjapan.org>.