

VOLUNTEER YOUR TIME

HOW AND WHERE TO GO TO GIVE OF YOURSELF IN JAPAN

story by Rob Goss

Gandhi once said that the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others. Because of language and sometimes cultural barriers, work and family commitments, however, trying to find yourself the Gandhi way in Japan by volunteering can seem daunting. Fortunately, it is not impossible.

If you have strong Japanese language skills, in many cases you can get involved with community work by simply contacting your local ward, city or town office and asking them for details of local community groups and projects. In Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward, by way of example, the ward office directs potential volunteers and organizations looking for volunteers to the Shinjuku Volunteer/Citizen Activities Center (03-5273-9191) and the Tokyo Volunteer/Citizen Activity Center (03-3235-1171). You may also be able to find ways of volunteering in your community by contacting your local community center or local culture center. However, if you don't have much confidence in your Japanese, or if you would like to volunteer in a more international atmosphere, don't be dismayed. There are plenty of options out there.

For anyone in the Tokyo area, one group that has built a great reputation since being formed in 2006 is Hands On Tokyo (HOT: www.handson-tokyo.org/en). HOT act as a bilingual volunteer clearing house, matching volunteers to projects that range from Special Olympics basketball and bowling programs to children's home visits and assisting with English conversation courses for the blind. They also organize special events throughout the year and offer volunteers the flexibility to help out on a regular, semi-regular or occasional basis. No special experience is needed for any of HOT's projects, just a genuine desire to want to help out, and they even have projects that are suitable for teens and children to volunteer for.

HOT gives all of their volunteers orientation before they help out with a specific project or nonprofit organization, but what really makes HOT an accessible option for anyone that isn't fluent in Japanese is that on each project a bilingual project coordinator accompanies volunteers to ensure that language barriers are not an issue. You can register as a volunteer with HOT online or call them on 03-5404-3563.

A similar option to HOT is the Volunteer Hotline, which is run by NGO/

NPO Agape International (www.jhelp.com), the same people who run the Japan Helpline, Japan Emergency Team and AIDS Hotline. The hotline has been helping to find suitable organizations for volunteers and vice versa since 1991 and can help you find ways of volunteering for a variety of projects across Japan and overseas. You can fill out an online application for volunteer work at www.jhelp.com/en/volhot or call the hotline toll-free 24-hours a day, 7 days a week (0570-000-911). Like HOT, the Volunteer Hotline doesn't charge for any of its services.

For people with time and money on their hands, a volunteering vacation is a possibility. One option is United Planet (www.unitedplanet.org), a US-based NGO that places volunteers in projects in countries around the globe. In Japan, they have programs that last from two to 12 weeks

and that include helping disabled Japanese working in an environmentally-friendly soap factory in Chiba, teaching English at after-school clubs, helping at an orphanage, and working with the intellectually disabled at a local community center. United Planet's volunteering vacations start from around \$2,000 and are operated year round, with programs commencing on the first and third Sunday of each month. Japanese ability is needed for their orphanage program, but otherwise all you need is English.

Don't have the time to volunteer? You can still make a big difference by donating, and there are many worthy organizations in Japan that are always appreciative of support. For example, a donation of ¥5,000 to the Tokyo English Life Line (www.telljp.com), which offers free, anonymous telephone counseling from 9am to 11pm daily, would support one shift on the Life Line (03-5774-0992),

while ¥60,000 would pay for them to fully train a new volunteer counselor. You could also donate something, no matter how small, to help Agape International fund its many projects or give something to Second Harvest Japan (www.2hj.org), an NPO which distributes food to soup kitchens, orphanages, the elderly, emergency shelters, single mothers, the homeless, migrant workers, and many others in Japan.

Whether you want to donate or get hands on, there are plenty of ways you can make a difference in Japan. And you may even find yourself while doing it.

