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Japan's First Lady Tours LaGuardia

Meets Participants In Study-Abroad Program



Akie Abe (seated at center), the first lady of Japan, was greeted by scores of LaGuardia Community College students during her tour of the Long Island City campus last Wednesday, Sept. 25. She is flanked by Dr. Gail Mellow, LaGuardia Community College president (seated at left of Abe) and Sumio Kusaka, ambassador and consul general of Japan in New York (seated at right of Abe).

Akie Abe, the wife of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, made a special visit to LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City last Wednesday, Sept. 25 to meet with students who are studying the country's language and culture and who recently participated in a study abroad program proposed by her husband.

During her whirlwind hour-long visit, Akie Abe and Sumio Kusaka, the ambassador and consul general of Japan in New York, observed students in a Japanese language class and met with students who were invited last May by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan and Japan Foundation to take part in an all-expense paid 10-day study tour of Japan.

Upon arriving on campus, the first lady of Japan was warmly greeted by Dr. Gail O. Mellow, president of LaGuardia, and the students. While some students wore kimonos, others held up Japanese characters that spelled out,

"Welcome to LaGuardia, Madam Akie Abe." All waved small Japanese flags.

Mellow showed Abe two cherry trees planted in the college's courtyard that were gifts from a consul general of Japan. The trees, which were presented to the college during the 100th anniversary of the planting of Japan's cherry blossom trees in the United States, are also symbols of the strong relationship between LaGuardia and the nation of Japan.

The first lady and the ambassador were then escorted to a classroom where they observed 20 students in a beginning Japanese language class. In one of the exercises several groups demonstrated how they would introduce themselves to their classmates in Japanese.

"It was nice to see the students study with such eagerness," said Abe.

The guests then met the 46 students from LaGuardia and eight sister schools who participated last summer in the travel abroad project, the "Kakehashi-Bridge for Tomorrow." The purpose of the project is to encourage deeper mutual understanding between the youth of Japan and the United States.

"The Kakehashi project was a life-changing experience for our students," said Mellow. "They experienced the beauty of Japan and the beauty of the Japanese culture."

Dr. Ann Feibel, the associate dean for academic affairs who led the students, expressed her gratitude to Abe and her husband for developing the project, seeing it come to fruition and allowing CUNY students to participate.

Speaking on behalf of the students, Anthony Burgos, a LaGuardia liberal arts major who studied Japanese for one semester and is interested in the country's traditions and history, delivered a speech in English that explained what the experience meant to the young travelers.

While an interpreter translated, Burgos said, "The program helped develop a deep, meaningful connection for both us and the Japanese people. You might say 'our hearts and theirs were touched by the other.' What lasted only 10 days will be remembered for a lifetime."

Anjelica Camacho, a John Jay history major who took three semesters of Japanese, offered her reflections in Japanese. She spoke about the Japanese students from Chuo University in Tokyo and Doshisha University in Kyoto whom the group befriended.

"My Japanese friends became my familv." said Camacho. "I can't wait to go back."

In her remarks to the students, Abe said that she was glad to hear that the students in the Kakehashi project had such a valuable experience.

"It is very important for young people to learn the Japanese language, to visit Japan and to interact with the local people," she said.

Responding to a question posed by a student regarding future student projects, Abe said she hopes similar projects will be offered in the future. In a comment that brought laughter and applause, she told those students who plan on returning to Japan, "If you will contact me, I might be able to invite you to the prime minister's residence."

On a more serious note, she explained that Kakehashi was made possible because of the strong ties between Japan and the United States.

"The U.S. is one of our most important allies," she said.

Expanding upon Abe's statement, Dr. Paul Arcario, the provost and senior vice president for academic affairs, said, "LaGuardia's role, in collaboration with our Japanese partners, is to guide the younger generation in continuing to maintain the bridge between our countries. We must continue to rebuild it together so that our bond of friendship continues to thrive for future generations. And I am confident that with students like Anthony and Anjelica the dream is in good hands."

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