

Transportation and Disaster Preparedness

Leo Bosner

When I entered the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program in the fall of 1999, I knew it would be a challenge to learn Japanese when I was already in my fifties, but I applied myself as best I could. After ten months of intensive language training in Arlington, Virginia, and two more months training while living with a Japanese family in Kanazawa, Japan, I went on to Tokyo, where I would spend a year studying how Japan responds to disasters, and teaching the Japanese how we do it in the U.S.

The Japanese had experienced numerous problems in responding to the 1995 earthquake that struck Kobe, so there was an intense interest in sharing ideas between Japanese disaster response agencies and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Japan's military, the Japan Self Defense Force (JSDF), plays a major role in disaster relief in Japan, so my primary Mansfield Fellowship placement was at JSDF Headquarters in Tokyo.

At JSDF, I would attend staff meetings, visit JSDF bases, and observe disaster exercises, while also giving briefings on FEMA. My JSDF office-mates were quite friendly and open to my being there, but it was clear that my presence placed a burden on them. The Japanese are very conscientious hosts, so wherever I went, someone had to go with me to make sure I got there okay, and someone had to be there to translate for me.

As my language skills slowly improved, I watched for an opportunity to change this, and in January 2001, the opportunity came. A disaster conference was being held in the city of Kurume, in southwestern Japan. The Mansfield folks okayed me to attend, but no one in my JSDF office was going. I could see that my Japanese colleagues were a bit worried about my going there on my own, but I persisted, and everyone got into the spirit of things. One fellow printed out the inter-city bus schedule for me; another found a map of Kurume and marked the conference location. A few days later I was off to Kurume.

When I entered the conference hall, it was clear that I was the only foreigner present. The young lady working the registration table looked up in surprise as I approached,

a look that quickly changed to a welcoming smile as I introduced myself in Japanese and asked to register for the conference.

At the conference, I ran into a number of Japanese disaster specialists I knew, and they all had the same questions: How did I get there? Who brought me? And they always had the same look of surprise when I said that no one had brought me, I had come on my own. Finally, a senior medical official said, “Mr. Bosner, you really should visit our emergency medical center to see how we plan for disasters.” I pulled out my appointment calendar and said, “Fine doctor, when is a good time for me to come?”

It had taken six months in-country, but now the Japanese understood that I sincerely wanted to learn how they handled disasters, and that my language skills were good enough that I didn't need an escort to take me everywhere. After that, I received one invitation after another to visit a fire service headquarters, a JSDF helicopter base, an emergency operations center, and other related sites. Soon the invitations came from places outside of Tokyo, and I began learning about Japanese disaster management in cities like Morioka, Shizuoka, and Kobe.

By the time I returned to the U.S. in September 2001, I had made numerous contacts in Japan, and I continued to receive speaking invitations to go there. FEMA does not have any official role in Japan, so with my boss's approval, I would take vacation time and travel to Japan once or twice a year to lecture on emergency management. With a bit of preparation (and some help from my Japanese friends), I was now able to make my own Japanese PowerPoint slides, and to give my lectures entirely in Japanese. And while I was continuing to give talks in Japan, I also shared what I had learned in Japan with my American colleagues, including giving a one-on-one briefing to a senior American official who was going to Japan.

The Fellowship experience also strengthened me as a federal employee. During my year in Japan, I had to organize and manage my work independently each day, balancing my time between language study, Japan research, and FEMA briefings, with my efforts culminating in an eighteen-page report on emergency management in Japan. When I returned to FEMA at the end of my Fellowship, my writing, speaking, and management skills had improved significantly, all of which earned me praise from my supervisors and eventually a promotion.

After my retirement from FEMA in 2008, I turned my attention completely to Japan. I have now lectured on disaster management in more than a dozen Japanese cities, and this year (2012) I spent six weeks in Japan under a fellowship from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, studying Japan's response to the March 2011

tsunami. I found the Japanese responders to that event to be highly competent and even heroic, but I also identified a number of significant gaps in Japan's overall disaster response plan. A short version of my report has been published in both English and Japanese, and the feedback from Japan's emergency response community has been very positive. I hope to return to Japan in 2013 to continue my research on this topic.

Working with my Japanese colleagues has been a great professional experience, and as Japan is an important friend and ally of the U.S., I believe this work is of value. On a personal level, I have found the Japanese to be people who constantly go out of their way to help a foreign visitor, and who are pleased if the foreigner has been able (like me) to learn even a few words of Japanese. I am extremely grateful for the opportunities that were given to me by the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program, and I look forward to my next trip to Japan.

Leo Bosner is an emergency management specialist who participated in the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program as a representative of the Federal Emergency Management Agency from 1999–2001. During his Fellowship year in Japan, he served in full-time placements in Japan's Defense Agency-Joint Staff Office (now the Ministry of Defense) and in the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's Disaster Prevention Bureau.