Finance, Trade and Development

Jordan Heiber*

In many ways, my experience as part of the fifteenth group (2010–2012) of Mansfield Fellows was similar to those of my predecessors on the program. I participated in several diverse and challenging rotations during my year in Tokyo, which were sandwiched between nerve-wracking introductory and farewell speeches at the Foreign Ministry; my cohort of Fellows was honored in the spring to enjoy a brief audience with Crown Prince Naruhito; and before returning to the United States, my wife and I made sure we enjoyed one—but only one—sunrise from the top of Mt. Fuji. However, in one very specific way, our experience was unique: our lives in Japan were shaped by the Great Tohoku Earthquake of March 11, 2011.

Over the course of three years in Japan, previously as a teacher in Fukui Prefecture, and most recently as a Mansfield Fellow, I experienced a number of earthquakes, most too small to register. I was occasionally awakened in the middle of the night during the more severe ones, and after listening to the windows and dishes rattle for a few seconds, I'd soon fall back asleep. They always gave me something to talk about at work the next day. From the start, however, the events of March 11 were markedly different. The earthquake on that day was incomparably large in size and excruciating in its duration. For the better part of five minutes the upper floors of the tower at Roppongi Midtown, which housed the UNIQLO headquarters where I was working, swayed and rattled as metal storage bins on wheels repeatedly crashed into one another. It felt as if an unseen giant had taken this forty-story structure and casually set it down on a ship in the middle of the ocean.

As a precautionary measure, our building was evacuated after the initial quake had subsided (a time-consuming and somewhat harrowing process of its own), and upon reaching the park across from our building, I started my walk home to ensure my wife was safe. Our mobile phone lines were jammed since the moment the earthquake struck, leaving me without a way to reach her. Walking through Roppongi and Azabu on my way to our apartment, I remember noticing that every payphone had a line of people trying to reach their own loved ones, and every store with a television had a crowd assembled outside watching NHK reporting

* The views expressed in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. government.

on the events we had just experienced and the damage incurred one hundred fifty miles to our north.

Although our inconveniences paled in comparison to the tragedy in northern Japan, those first few days after the earthquake were not easy ones. Transportation in downtown Tokyo came to a standstill, the situation at the nuclear plant grew increasingly uncertain, and we remained glued to our television sets and the Internet, searching for information and updating friends and family on our safety. As with the other Fellows and their families we had arrived with in Tokyo the previous summer, my wife and I remained intent on staying in Japan to finish out the Fellowship year. And as life slowly began to go back to normal, we were constantly inspired by the calm, grace, and fortitude of the Japanese people.

Just as the events of March 11, 2011, helped to shape my year as a Mansfield Fellow, they are also defining my post-Fellowship experience. In October 2011, I returned to the Department of State and began a new assignment in the Office of Japanese Affairs, responsible for U.S. science, technology, energy, and environmental cooperation with Japan. Many of the issues that fill my workday in Washington relate directly to our post-March 11 collaboration efforts. This includes coordinating with colleagues at our embassy in Tokyo and the Department of Energy to bring civic leaders from the Tohoku region to the United States to learn about U.S. disaster recovery efforts; facilitating our ongoing cooperation with Japan as it looks to fill its energy needs; and working with the international community to assist with remediation efforts near the Fukushima nuclear plant. I have found it immensely rewarding to be able to spend each day engaged in issues that I know are both tremendously important to our bilateral relationship with Japan and uniquely related to my own year in Tokyo as a Mansfield Fellow.

During my Fellowship year, I had the opportunity to visit the Tohoku region twice in the months after the March 11 earthquake struck. My wife and I joined a volunteer tour to Fukushima on the earthquake's three-month anniversary and I later went to a disaster response conference in Sendai as part of my placement at the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry. During both of these trips, I marveled at the progress that the Japanese people were making in rebuilding their lives and communities. Overturned cars were being removed from rice paddies, schools and businesses were reopening, and people were looking to future opportunities while reflecting on recent and ongoing struggles.

I will soon have the privilege to return to Fukushima in my current capacity at the State Department as part of a government and private sector delegation exploring

U.S.-Japan cooperation in renewable energy, a field that has received heightened importance in Japan since last year. When I witness the reconstruction that has taken place since my last visit, there is no question in my mind that I will be equally moved and impressed.

Jordan Heiber participated in the Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program as a representative of the U.S. Department of State from 2009–2011. During his Fellowship year in Japan, he served in full-time placements in Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNIQLO Co., Ltd., and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. He also completed a Diet placement in the office of the Honorable Mr. Otani Nobumori, DPJ Member, House of Representatives. He currently is a Foreign Affairs Officer at the U.S. Department of State.