

## **Kelso-Makinohara Sister City Exchange Program**

In 1990 dignitaries from, then, Sagara, now, Makinohara Japan came to Kelso with the intentions of setting up a Sister City Exchange Program. After many discussions the program conducted its first student exchange in 1994 and has since formed and nurtured relationships between over 200 people. As this program continues into its 15th year we still hold the same goals to form international life long friendships. The exchange encourages these friendships and opportunities between citizens of both communities.

Makinohara and Kelso are actually very well suited for each other. Many Makinohara families have some interest in the the production of green tea, where Kelso has many families that have involvement in the logging industry. Kelso is know as a great place to dip for smelt and Makinohara is known for its Shirasu, a tiny white fish found in many dishes in the right season. Makinohara and Kelso also have similar average household incomes at around \$40,000 per year. Kelso and Makinohara are both fortunate in their geographical location. Both cities find themselves centrally located to mountains, oceans, large cities, and farm land providing our students with a greater knowledge of the world around them. Aside from culture many of our students will find that their lives are very similar to their Japanese counterparts.

The Kelso-Makinohara Student Exchange is a home stay program that accepts up to 10 students each year. Our Kelso students spend roughly two weeks in a home in Makinohara with the unique experience of getting to see what everyday life as a Japanese family member actually looks like. They spend time getting to know the family members and their roles in their family unit. When the Kelso student's two weeks in Japan comes to an end, they fly back to Washington to welcome their exchange sibling into their own home here in Kelso. Together with their parents our students get to show the Japanese students how we live our lives. As representatives of not only themselves, and their families but also of our city, state and country our students take on a huge responsibility and are filled with honor and pride in the work that they have put in. From the fund raising that they do, to be able to pay for their trip, to the lifelong relationships that they have cultivated our students have the opportunity of a life time to learn life skills that they can continue to build upon for the rest of their lives.

In Makinohara, and in Kelso, the safety and happiness of our students is of the upmost importance to this program. On both the Japanese and American sides we have lengthy applications. They not only provide us with the information, and permission, we need to conduct background checks on all participants over 18 years of age, but also gives us insight into who our students and families really are. We use this information, with our Japanese committee members, to do our best in matching Kelso students with similar Makinohara students.

Any interested party can attend our initial meeting in the beginning of December, there will be a public announcement about when and where that will take place. From that meeting the families will receive more information and be able to take home, or fill out, our paper application. Once the paper application has been received our committee will conduct a home visit to ensure that the Makinohara student will be comfortable in the Kelso home, and to ask and answer any additional questions. We

have come across situations where we have a Kelso or Makinohara student who is unable to host the other student in their own home, and we have developed options to be able to still include the Kelso and Makinohara students in the program. We do require things such as, “the Makinohara student must have their own bed” but we are willing to lend a cot or air mattress when it is needed. Some parents in the past haven’t been able to take time off work and we have been able to find other people who are willing to take the students on outings. We are of the belief that every question has an answer, and we encourage all questions. Sometimes we have to make case by case decisions. Over the past 14 years we have learned to adapt to every family’s unique situation while still being able to cultivate these relationships. We encourage all interested parties to reach out and get involved in any way they are capable.

We are fortunate to have had this opportunity and we are striving to share it with every one. Our president, La Donna Page, can be reached by email at [ladonna.stacey@gmail.com](mailto:ladonna.stacey@gmail.com), on her cell phone at (623) 853-3455 or on her home phone at (360) 636-7848. If you have any questions about how you or your family can become involved please feel free to contact us at any time.