

Nov 04, 2016 by [Emily T. Metzgar](#)

This is what public diplomacy looks like ^[1]

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program has been around since 1987. This program, the largest component of which places native English speakers in Japan's junior and senior high schools for year-long tours of duty as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), has thousands of alumni from around the world – more than 20,000 from the United States alone. Run as a jointly administered program by the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs & Communications (MIC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology (MEXT) and the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), JET has faced tough talk at home in recent years as Japan's political leadership seeks ways to control government spending. The value of a program bringing so many young people to Japan for one, two, three and even four-year stays has been questioned.

But in the aftermath of Japan's devastating earthquake and tsunami, the value of having a large, worldwide network of college-educated foreigners who understand, respect and appreciate Japanese society and culture continues to emerge. A look at a JET alumni networking website, [JETwit.com](#), provides ample evidence of the many ways in which current and former JETs are responding in whatever ways they can to the disaster hitting a country that all of them, at one time or another, have called home.

Consider, too, the response of formal JET Alumni Associations within the United States. A [JETAA New York fundraiser](#) attracted a crowd of more than 300 and raised \$10,000 in relief for Japan. [JETAA Northern California](#) raised more than \$7000. Meanwhile, current and former JETs are selling the "[Quakebook](#)," a collection of stories from people who experienced the March quake. Armed with the Twitter hashtag "#Quakebook" the project has earned media attention from CNN, BBC and elsewhere. All proceeds from the sale of the book will be donated the Japan Red Cross. The [association](#) of current JETs (AJET) has distributed information to its members across Japan offering guidance about how they can organize food and clothing drives for the stricken areas.

Sadly, the JET community has also mourned the loss of two American JETS who were killed in the March 11 disaster. The community has read with horror the recollections of a JET, now safely home in the States, caught in the disaster. The community has read with pride the press account of a current JET who refuses to leave the now-devastated community to which she was assigned with the program.

All this publicly-recorded activity is only part of the response from American JET alumni. The public examples of support are surely eclipsed by the private thoughts, prayers and quiet interactions of alumni among friends, family, coworkers and others with whom they have built their post-JET lives all the while murmuring in quiet agreement that this is, indeed, a sad time for Japan.

Fortunately, few countries ever see their carefully cultivated international friendships called

upon to provide donations, disaster relief, prayers and support in the face of a massive tragedy. But Japan, in this difficult hour, is reaping the benefits of years of dedication to internationalization in the form of JET. If the goal of a country's public diplomacy efforts is to build connections with citizens of other countries in hopes of promoting and maintaining relationships for the long term, then JET can surely be counted as a success.

A comment from a Japanese reader following the announcement of the death of JET Taylor Anderson provides perspective. It reads, "Thank you Taylor for coming to Japan as one of ambassadors from U.S. I am really sorry that you were in the disaster and lost your life. You will be remebered for all of us as a great and ambitious JET.[sic]"

It is certainly true that Americans and others participating in the JET Program serve as citizen ambassadors for their home countries. But a quick look at the response of the American JET community in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami suggests those same JETs return home to become active, compassionate and connected ambassadors for Japan. And isn't that the essence of public diplomacy?

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