

Japanese visitors learn how Galveston recovered from Hurricane Ike during exchange program

By MATT DEGROOD The Daily News | Posted: Tuesday, November 29, 2016 11:00 pm

Although it was just his first time in the United States and only three days were under his belt, Mataso Sasaki had nothing but positive things to say about Galveston.

“It’s a very nice place,” he said. “Especially the people.”

Sasaki, the general manager of Oceans Miyoko International Club and the vice principal of a junior high school near Miyako, Japan, is one of several Japanese representatives visiting Galveston as part of an exchange program to discuss community building after natural disasters.

“It’s interesting,” he said. “I’m trying to compare and seek common points and differences between the communities.”

The program, which is called the U.S.-Japan Grassroots Exchange Program, is in its second year of existence.

During its first year in 2015, representatives from Galveston and New Orleans traveled to Miyako and Kobe in Japan to learn how those cities dealt with natural disasters.

“The experience there was life-changing,” Gina Spagnola, president of the Galveston Regional Chamber of Commerce and one of the program’s representatives, said. “We were able to set up a day to talk to the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and discuss some similar issues. We are alike in so many ways.”

Four cities are participating in the exchange, which is put on by the East-West Center. Those are Galveston and New Orleans in the United States and Kobe and Miyako in Japan.

The 10 representatives from Japan arrived in Galveston Saturday and will stay until Thursday.

“We are seeing interesting things,” Tsutomu Obata said. “I was really surprised to learn that it was not just the storm surge from Ike in 2008 that caused damage, but the other toxic things leaked into the Gulf.”

Kobe was struck by an earthquake in 1995 that killed 6,400 people and destroyed more than 110,000 buildings.

Miyako was hit by an earthquake and tsunami in 2011 that killed 16,000 people and displaced 340,000 people from their homes.



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Shizuyo Yoshitomi, executive director of the Takatori Community Center in Kobe, Japan, photographs John Simsen, the disaster program director for Galveston, as he talks about the city’s recovery after Hurricane Ike on Tuesday during a meeting with the U.S.-Japan Grassroots Exchange Program at city hall.

The visitors spent the early part of Tuesday listening to Freda Marie Brown, executive director for St. Vincent's House, a faith-based social services agency, discussing how to rebuild social service networks after Hurricane Ike and a presentation and greeting by Mayor Jim Yarbrough at city hall, 823 Rosenberg Ave.

“The big thing is you are always trying to learn,” Yarbrough said. “We’ve had similar experiences, but they aren’t the same. Our delegates went over there last year and picked their brains. It’s important not to get stuck in our way of thinking.”

After concluding their stay in Galveston, the visitors will visit New Orleans to learn how the city recovered from Hurricane Katrina in 2005.