

Campus News

"By the students, for the students" "By the students, for the students" "By the students, for the students"

Kokusai Chaya: The Ups and Downs of Student Initiatives

By Katsue Anchi

"How do you spend four years of your university life?" How we answer this question will be different for each student and we have a wide variety of choices. Many students dream of going abroad to study. But one possibility that can be just as fulfilling, and just as 'international' is working with other students outside of the classroom. This story is about a very active student group at Kochi University called, "Kokusai Chaya". Actually, I am one of the members of this student group and through this story I would like to tell you about our group and share some of our experiences.

The concept of Kokusai Chaya is to "make connections between people"

Three years ago, Kokusai Chaya was established from a General Education course called "Introduction to International Cooperation". At the end of this course, students make an action plan related to international cooperation which they can do in their daily lives. The first idea the students had was to open a café to create a space where Japanese students and exchange students can communicate. However, due to money issues and the lack of an appropriate place for the café, we couldn't make it happen. In this early stage, the Kokusai Chaya group then shifted their attention to planning events and making profit so that we could ultimately achieve our dream. The concept of Kokusai Chaya is to "make connections between people".

To fulfill our mission, Kokusai Chaya is based on three key words: 'International', 'Local', and 'Students'. By international, we mean not only things outside of Japan but also sharing our Japanese culture with foreign people right here in Japan. By local we hope to profile what Kochi is all about to students and people from outside the prefecture, and we



try to make opportunities for KU students to communicate with local people and rural communities in Kochi. Our third key word is 'students', and this is important because we try to make opportunities for students to gain experience. By organizing events, our members learn important things outside the classroom. We want people to know that students are very capable of contributing to our local and international community.

To better introduce our group, I would like to focus on two big projects we have been working on.

Shimanto-cho International Sports Festival

One of the main events of Kokusai Chaya is an international sports festival, which is held at Nanasato elementary school in Shimanto town. Participants of this program are from universities in Kochi, and some ALTs and exchange students. The day before the sports festival, some participants experienced homestays with local families. In addition, during lunchtime at the sports festival participants enjoy what we called the "World Stall", which sells food from several foreign countries such as Mexico, Singapore, and Vietnam. In April 2014, Kokusai Chaya proudly held its 2nd international sports festival and nearly 300 people took part in this event.

In the Nanasato area, people used to have their original sports festival every year. However, because of the aging society and declining birthrate, it became difficult to manage the event. Therefore this sports festival had disappeared for about 30 years. Yet many people strongly wanted to re-start this event again. In 2011, the former head teacher of Nanasato elementary school, Mr. Sakayama gave some lectures in the "Introduction to International Cooperation" course. At that time, Kokusai Chaya members started thinking about how to proceed with their activities, and they came up with the idea to hold a sports festival. Then, when Mr. Sakayama explained the situation of Nanasato, he suggested, "Why don't you hold your international sports festival in the local area of Shimanto town?"

In so many ways, this event has had a positive effect for people from different backgrounds. First, for our KU students, it is a very nice opportunity to experience all that Kochi has to offer by communicating with local people. For the local people

in Shimanto town, young and old, they can get a chance to join the festival and spend good times again. One participant of the event said, "I liked the original sports festival so much but this year's was also amazing! I had never imagined we could hold this kind of event again." And international students and other foreign participants can experience important traditions in local areas, and meeting more local people.

Café Kokusai Chaya

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, Kokusai Chaya had longed to open a café for two years. This dream finally came true in April 2014. The first step in opening a café came from a small suggestion from a friend of a Kokusai Chaya member who decided to live near Kochi University. He suggested that we use the first floor of his building and share the rent. Upon starting the café, members talked again and again because it was a really good chance. However, we are students and it seemed really difficult for us to take such a risk, mainly a financial risk, and make such a time and energy commitment. Kokusai Chaya members are all Kochi University students but in reality our group is not officially recognized by the university itself. This situation means that when a serious problem arises, all responsibility comes to the students. In spite of this, opening the café has been a project we have long hoped to do, and after some time, we were ready to start our own café very near KU.

For the opening day of the café, many people visited Café Kokusai Chaya. It was far beyond our expectations. Yet, such good conditions did not last so long. We gradually faced a lot of problems. Kokusai Chaya members work at the café as volunteer staff but, of course, we have classes too. So juggling our timetable was hard. It was very difficult to manage work-time shifts. In addition, the number of items on our menu was limited and it became difficult to make a profit every day. To solve these difficulties students worked really hard to come up with solutions. For example, they decided to have small events or parties every week and charge some money as a participation fee. Some students who are good at cooking made things for the café menu. But despite these efforts, we were forced to close the café. Sharing the café with people living in the same building meant that there were worries about hygiene and health officials said we couldn't continue. Unfortunately, the Café Kokusai Chaya had to close its doors in July 2014. Our Kokusai Chaya members were very disappointed, but they learned a lot of things through this big project.

Now, Kokusai Chaya members are re-grouping and continuing their efforts to plan events and try hard to make it as students. It is a really good opportunity for students to challenge to do new things and do these things by themselves. Of course it does not work well all the time, but failure doesn't mean the end of our challenges. In spite of our disappointment, we're trying to be positive by saying, "Failure is proof that you tried".

As you see from this article, students can manage quite well on our own if we work together with a solid theme. Lots of students are afraid to try something new, thinking that failure is likely. But we don't see it like that. It's so important to seek better ways to contribute and grow, and we hope you see the activity of Kokusai Chaya as an inspiration to keep challenging.

Our 12th Edition: KU Campus News! Read all about it!

The Kochi University Campus News aims to present a voice for the students of our university. It is meant to profile the great potential of the many KU students who take initiative and action during their university days. We have to learn from the experiences of those who have taken the first step in making something special and unique from their university experience.

This newspaper will introduce some of the people who might inspire other students. These people encourage us to try something new. Although it is hard to try things that we are not sure about, it is very important for us as university students, to take advantage of our time here and make the most of our opportunities. Now is the time to think about our future and gain valuable life experiences.

The purpose of publishing *The Kochi University Campus News* is to inform students about what is happening around the campus. As we profile some students and teachers from the various faculties, we can see what other students are interested in. We believe students will see that our university is a lot more dynamic than we might think. It's a small local university, but all students have the potential to open up their world. As we present some aspects of our university, we hope that this will give students an

opportunity to think about how university life should be, and inspire students to be more active in their learning.

Another goal of this newspaper is to promote the many international aspects of our campus. As always, our main focus is on the word 'exchange'. There are many international students, teachers, and researchers here at Kochi University, and there are many Japanese students who are involved with international projects. Hearing about them helps us to understand more, start friendships and develop relationships. International opportunities abound for us. Let's learn more about them and do what we can to fulfill our potential. Profiling this aspect of our campus is good for us as students.

Last, but not least, we would like to follow the lead of the students who have worked hard on the *KU Campus News* over the past years. This newspaper represents the voice of students. Although we are always trying out new column ideas, the theme remains the same for this 12th edition, "By the students, for the students". We thank you for taking the time to read our paper. Comments, suggestions, criticisms and feedback of any kind are welcome. Please enjoy the twelfth edition!