

In this summer, my LiA was in Tokyo, Japan with an NGO called YouMeWe. Now before I talk about what my actual experience was like in Japan, let me first talk about what went on the background to work with YouMeWe.

Around December of 2022, since my first year of Laidlaw was working on a pre-assigned research topic, when it came to deciding an LiA I knew that I wanted to find a LiA for myself and my own interests. I specifically knew that I wanted to have an LiA in Japan given how fascinated I am by the culture and the role they play on the international stage, I wanted to understand on a deeper, more holistic level what Japanese culture was like and enact change in whatever way I can. Thus, the hunt for a Japanese/English charity began since I unfortunately cannot speak Japanese. To do so, I put my research skills to good use and research all the active Japanese/English charities and sent a lot of speculative applications. One responded which we now retrospectively know is YouMeWe.

After many meetings and consolidations with the YouWeMe team including the Founder and CEO Michael Clemons, the need for a global platform and opportunity for local students to share their stories and experiences was identified. Especially in such a collectivist society like Japan, people who are not considered 'normal' are often shunned and forgotten by society. With such rigid emphasis on family and blood lines, 9/10 orphans are sent to institutionalized homes with only 1/10 children adopted into individual-based familial systems. As such, having such a large platform such as TEDx for orphans to talk about their personal stories will not only immensely empower them but also allow them to learn skills such as communication, writing, public speaking, and more. Such a platform will also allow the larger Japanese public to learn about the problems of institutionalized homes to empathize and hopefully change public sentiment to real long-term change. Additionally, to present a well-rounded picture of this issue, we have decided to invite experts will also speak about the systemic side of this problem and their own professional experiences in helping orphans in Japan to deliver a wider, more distinct perspectives and advocate for this meaningful cause.

My role during the 6 weeks working with YouMeWe included:

1. Introductory considerations into the logistics of the Tedx event (Surveying venues, meetings with YouWeMe to manage expectations and considerations about venues, budget plans, sound and tech, decorations and more)
2. Applying for either a Standard Tedx or a Youth Tedx license (given my previous experience as Head Curator of Tedx in another local event at my school, I plan on consolidating with past coworkers)
3. Finding and curating potential speakers (This includes finding orphans/people of interest, judging speaker proposals applications, meeting speakers, editing speeches to Tedx guidelines)
4. Signposting useful files and know-hows to the future team (Given time constricts, I can help with the planning stages and not the actual logistics. As such, referring and giving useful files and tips would hopefully prevent major issues and allow the production of the Tedx event go smoothly as I cannot be there to help logistics during the actual event)

As you can see, I was given real responsibility to act as a director and lead organizer for this TEDx event, to set down solid foundations, organize the logistical details of the event, and prepare staff and team members so that the event will run smoothly in 2024. Though I was nervous and worried, I was overall excited by the prospect of using my skills and past

experiences to help the community in need, which was the children living in institutionalized homes.

Now reflecting on the trip almost two months later, two experiences stand out in stark memory. One, I was graciously invited to visit some of the children living in institutionalized homes and assist in classroom administration while the children were being taught by staff in YouMeWe. I distinctly remember the first time I went to the one of the orphanages, I was very sympathetic and sorrowful for the children, As I was walking up the stairs to the classroom, I thought about how they would most likely never feel a parent's love and how they must feel so sad and alone. However, once I actually met the children, I was struck by how cheerful and friendly they were! Though they were a language barrier, I could easily see the close bond the children had with each other, how the older children took care of the younger children, and how the younger children clearly respected their elders. Everyone was so rambunctious and bursting with energy! This experience made me reflect on my pre-conceptions and reminded me that though it is okay to feel sympathetic, these well-meaning emotions should be based on reality and not on preconceptions for communities/environments in need.

Another experience I distinctly remember was the day-to-day of working in the office to make this TEDx event from an idea to reality. From needing to use Google maps to find my way to completely being able to get by with my own memory, being able to see such iconic sights to my daily travel such as Shibuya Crossing and the Hachiko statue, and of course working hard in such a friendly and beautiful office every day, this experience has definitely strengthened my leadership, organizational, and planning skills. Given my prior experience working as Head Curator for my School's TEDx event, a lot of my work was self-directed which was a new style of working that I have come to enjoy. In conclusion, my LiA has been a wonderful experience full of new work experiences, cultural learning and appreciation, and fun! The skills I have further developed will be invaluable to me and I look forward to the next step of my journey.



