

'It's just been an amazing experience'

MCYSA homestay program creates bond between families in Lakewood, Japan

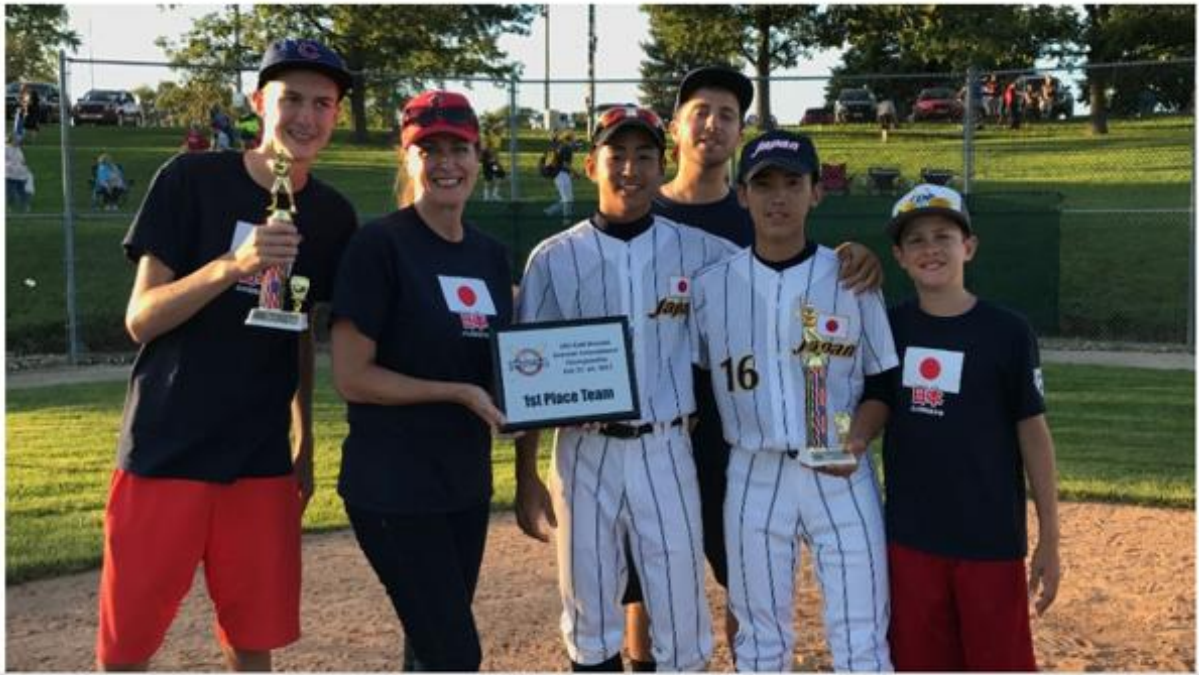


Photo provided by Stacie Spiewak
Matthew Bass (from left), Stacie Spiewak, Kengo Tomita, Stephen Spiewak, Mizuki Uchida and Ethan Bass pose after the McHenry County Youth Sports Association's Summer International Championships in 2017.

BY MICHAL DWOJAK - MDWOJAK@SHAWMEDIA.COM

YOUTH SPORTS

Six pictures stand on a mantle above a fireplace inside Stephen and Stacie Spiewak's Lakewood home. The photos vary in size and frame styles, but each image displays a similar family memory.

Stephen and Stacie, accompanied by their two sons, pose together with a couple of Japanese youth baseball players who are usually holding a plaque or trophy.

The pictures serve as reminders of a successful summer come and gone.

Each photo marks a year when the Spiewak family participated in the homestay program for the McHenry County Youth Sports Association's Summer International Championships.

"We are so proud of it," Stacie said.

In one of the photos is a then-14 yearold Kengo Tomita from 2017. Tomita smiles as he rests his left arm over teammate Mizuki Uchida's shoulders while they are embraced by the Spiewak family.

Like many photos, it had more than one message. The picture commemorated the first year the Spiewaks participated in the homestay program.

But it also marked the start of their relationship with Tomita: the years of laughter, cries, worldwide travels and late-night English lessons over Zoom.

That photo marked how they changed each other's lives.

"[Doing the homestay program was] initially a way for us to kind of volunteer and to give something back," Stephen said. "But the reality is we've gained so much more than what we've put into it. It's just been an amazing experience for us."



Learning new worlds The decision wasn't made quickly.

The MCYSA needed families to host international players for the 2017 tournament.

Each family would host a player or two they had never met for eight days while they competed in the tournament with their team.

The Spiewak's youngest son's team, part of the MCYSA and the family, was asked if they would host some players.

After almost a week of family deliberations, they decided to do it.

"We had no idea what to expect," Stephen said. "We had no idea how it would go."

They hit their first roadblock early.

The family assumed the players they would host would speak Spanish because most of the international teams come from Spanish-speaking countries.

Stephen had studied Spanish and felt comfortable with his ability to communicate with whomever they hosted.

Once they learned they would be hosting Japanese players, the family quickly did their research about Japanese culture. They used a translating app to help communicate once Tomita and Uchida arrived. And they turned to a video game that doesn't need any translation regardless where it's played - Mario Kart.

"That first night, all of them, including my husband, all of the kids were playing Mario Kart," Stacie said. "[They were] having a blast."

Tomita wasn't sure what to expect with the homestay program either. His coaches encouraged him to join a team that would compete in the MCYSA tournament.

Tomita didn't speak English well and didn't know many of his new teammates.

Despite the language barrier, Tomita embraced the opportunity to learn more about an unfamiliar part of the world.

"They showed their life and they shared their time," Tomita said. "That was the biggest thing for me."

There were plenty of learning moments for everyone. Stacie recalled when Stephen made breakfast and asked the boys how they wanted their eggs cooked with their rice. When they responded "natural," he assumed that meant a sunny-side up fried egg.

The two ate their breakfast, but when they wanted more, they grabbed some more rice and cracked an egg over it like they'd eat at home.

"[Doing the program has] given me an interest in the Japanese language," Stephen said. "It's given me an interest in Japanese cuisine, in Japanese culture, things that I never would have expected to be interested in otherwise."

Tomita enjoyed the experiences of playing in the MCYSA tournament. The players exchanged pins with other teams, participated in a parade and had the honor of representing their home country.

And there was winning - Tomita's team won the tournament.

The players also got to learn more about American lifestyle. In between tournament games and practices, they attended a Chicago Cubs game where they met some Japanese MLB players and saw different parts of Chicago.

There also were everyday activities.

They hung out at home, drove around in the car, played games and went swimming.

"They don't want them to just come here and win all the games," Stacie said.

"They want them to have an experience living in an American home. They could probably afford to get hotel rooms if they wanted to do that. That's not what they want for these boys. They want them to have a great experience. It's a special privilege to be able to provide that."

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Stephen Spiewak, Lakewood resident

'A no-brainer'

In many instances, the Spiewak's relationships with the players they hosted didn't stop when the tournament ended. Stephen and his family have kept in contact with the players and their families over the years.

"If you provide the opportunity for these boys to have an amazing week and you share great memories together, you know you'll always have those," Stephen said. "It's OK if down the road you're not as close to them. But for us, the idea of keeping in touch with the boys we've hosted has been a no-brainer, just because we've been so impressed and touched by how kind and thoughtful and just amazing they've been."

That was particularly true with Tomita. After enjoying his experience in the U.S., Tomita wanted to study abroad for college. He learned about a program at the University of Nebraska–Omaha for students from Japan and decided he wanted to enroll.

But he needed help with his English.

Stephen happily obliged. The two had kept in contact since he left the U.S. and Stephen was excited by Tomita's interest in coming back. They set up times late at night or early in the morning and practiced English over Zoom. With the help, Tomita was accepted into the program.

"[Playing in the tournament] was a very unique experience for me," Tomita said. "It had a big effect in my decision after five years to come to the U.S."

Proximity kept their relationship strong once Tomita returned to the U.S.

When many students traveled home for holiday breaks, Tomita traveled to Illinois to celebrate with the Spiewaks.

Tomita's family even visited them in Lakewood.

The bond hasn't been limited to the U.S. The Spiewak family traveled to Japan in 2019 and spent time with Tomita's.

They also visited other families whose children they had hosted.

As the years went on, the same laughs and cries that started in 2017 continued.

"It really felt very special, goodwill, whatever you want to call it," Stacie said. "It just felt so very special to have that connection with these amazing people."

The whole group might visit Tomita, who's now at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, to watch him play club baseball.

They're all planning to be together again in December when they watch Tomita graduate.

Tomita recommended doing the homestay program and was grateful he took a chance. He felt like it broadened his vision of the world and changed his life.

"I want to recommend homestay to the players," Tomita said. "This is one of the most unique experiences in your life."

The Spiewaks plan to host more players this summer as they have each year a Japanese team has come over since 2017. They look forward to adding another picture to the mantle and creating new memories.

"You might not know how to communicate right away," Stephen said. "You might have to figure out the food that they like or some of the activities, but all of those challenges are things that you have to work through, you figure it out."

By the end of it, you're sad that it's over because it's just such an enriching experience."