Kris Washington, USC Track

Working at the TOMODACHI camp in my eyes was the most important camp that we had scheduled. It also turned out to be the best camp I have ever been a part of simply because the children were so grateful and such a blessing to work with that it made everything even easier on myself.

Seeing the children laugh and smile every morning at the TOMODACHI camp touched my heart in such a special way that saying goodbye to them at the end was probably the most difficult task I had this entire summer. Personally, I did not want the TOMODACHI camp to end because I was growing such an incredible bond with these children that I not only forgot that they were affected so deeply by the tsunami a few years ago but I also realized how special all these children truly were.

One of the campers reminded us all how, even though we may not fully be able to understand each other all of the time, it does not mean we cannot connect with each other through the heart. The TOMODACHI camp is not just a camp that you can simply forget about because those children were so special that words cannot even describe the amount fun we had. Whether it was from the late night walks home, the wrestling at the beach or even the amount of times they helped me learn basic Japanese, these kids were so special that it kills me knowing that I could not stay longer with them.

Going forward, I personally encourage everyone to not only continue the TOMODACHI camp, but find a way to expand it. Granted, I understand it may cost a lot and it requires a lot of extra work for everyone. However, when we see the reward of children who have lost everything having the time of their lives, then that will outweigh everything.
This summer I was given a wonderful opportunity to participate in the TOMODACHI Initiative camp. Together with several other counselors, we ran an American style camp for campers whom had been affected by the tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

My first interaction with the campers was amazing. Despite all that had befallen them, these kids were extremely happy, enthusiastic, and eager to learn. As the camp proceeded and the campers began to grow tired I expected to see a slight waning of this, however, with each passing day and activity if anything these traits increased. It made it very easy as a counselor to give everything we had to the camp.

As a result, the TOMODACHI Camp was one of the best experiences of my life. It was truly inspiring to see how all of these children had dealt with all the problems in their life and at the very least for the camp responded with nothing but positive energy. The drive to give these kids the best possible experience at the camp, not only woke you up in the morning, but supplied a surplus of energy raising every counselor’s performance. Further compounding this was the impression that you were really making an impact upon these children’s lives. I will never forget at Ask the Americans (an activity in which the children can ask us anything they want and both their question and our answer will be translated into the others language) when one of the older campers asked what we thought about college. He explained that he had heard about it, but did not believe it was really important or for him, and was therefore not pursuing it, but he wanted our opinion of it. When we spoke of the opportunities college provided he really listened and said afterward he had changed his mind.

Throughout the camp we struggled with the language barrier to a certain extent. This was not a bad thing as we, both campers and counselors, learned to communicate with each other better through facial expressions and movements. Every day verbal communication also became easier as the campers picked up English at an alarming rate (especially compared to my attempts to learn Japanese). At the end of the camp several kids gave us letters written in English that were heart-touching and inspiring and showed the potential all of these children have.

The final day of the camp when we departed was a very emotional day. Some of the campers cried, some of the counselors teared up, emails were exchanged (to this day I am still in contact with some of the campers), and we boarded the bus. As we left, the campers chased the bus waving goodbye, I hope it is only a temporary goodbye, as more and more Americans participate in the TOMODACHI initiative and have the chance to impact both the lives of children and their own.