

PHOTO: KENSHIRO MAMURA



JOCV member Takahisa Arai watches as villagers in Laos separate kudzu fibers.

## Toward the Future, Side by Side

For 50 years, JICA's Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCVs) have been providing technical support in developing countries for economic and social development, reconstruction, and other objectives. The first country to welcome JOCVs was Laos, in 1965. Since that time, the program has continued to dispatch passionate and motivated volunteers to partner countries to work closely with local people in building a brighter future.

### A BRIDGE SPANNING A HALF CENTURY

Laos is known as one of Asia's most remote countries. Visitors today to the capital of Vientiane, however, are struck by a vastly different image: a bustling city of high-rise buildings and traffic jams, as well as corner cafes and restaurants that hark back to Laos's history as a French colony.

A mere hour's drive outside of the capital pro-

vides a strikingly different scene. Out in the Laotian countryside, fields set peacefully among the verdant hills and valleys and the friendly smiles of passersby hint at a slower, more pastoral way of life.

The first JOCVs, five Japanese youths, landed in Laos in 1965. In the 50 years since their arrival, successive volunteers have preserved the spirit of these pioneers in working closely with local residents, serving as a bridge linking Laos and Japan.

An hour north by plane from Vientiane, in the remote province of Oudomxay, is a productivity and marketing center run by the province's Department of Industry and Commerce. The region was once notorious for its production of opium poppies. Currently, programs are underway to reduce reliance on poppy farming by promoting the production of handicrafts as a means for residents to earn a living. The center plays an important role in this process, overseeing the sale and distribution of finished products.

JOCV member Takahisa Arai uses his sales knowledge to provide the center with ideas as well as other types of support. Inside the center, products like bags, pouches, and shawls made from cotton and other natural fibers are stacked neatly in rows. "Women's groups from eight different villages

make the handicrafts," explains Arai. "They live in remote mountain villages, subsisting largely on agriculture. These products are an important source of cash income for them."

After graduating from university, Arai worked at a financial institution, where he helped oversee loans to small and medium-sized businesses. Using experience gained in helping different Japanese enterprises improve their operations, Arai has been influential since coming to Oudomxay in providing a wide variety of plans and ideas. These have included designing displays and point of purchase advertising to explain about products, as well as the creation of promotional posters and leaflets.

### MAKING PRODUCTS WITH A LOCAL TOUCH

Traditional raised-floor dwellings stand side by side in the village of Mang, a small community inhabited by the Khmu, one of Lao's many ethnic groups. Life moves along traditional lines in this highland region, located an hour and a half by car from the center along winding mountain roads.

Arai notes that the village women have very impressive skills. In a display of this prowess, a woman deftly uses a knife to split kudzu vines and remove the inner fiber, which she quickly twists into a thin piece of twine. These light cords, which retain their strength even when wet, are woven into bags. Watching as the Khmu women apply traditional skills passed down over generations, Arai interjects: "This may look easy, but it is very difficult."

Seang, the leader of one women's group, smiles as she explains how it is fun making bags with Arai, whom she calls Taka. As she goes about her duties, Seang emanates an aura of warmth, community, and heartiness that remains prevalent in this region even as it seems to be fading in developed countries like Japan.

Arai is involved in helping the women of the community to utilize traditional skills in creating handicrafts to sell to tourists. Previously, Seang and the other women had been weaving kudzu into shoulder bags, but they proved unpopular with tourists because of their size. To address the issue, the women have begun weaving smaller bags and introducing new design aspects, such as creating striped patterns using dyed twine.

Mayphone Silivong, the manager of the center's promotion and product development section, shares her Japanese colleague's ambitions for the center. "We hope to create products that have a broad appeal to consumers," explains Silivong. "Our ultimate goal is to begin exporting them."

For the women in the village, starting new projects is not always an easy task. According to Arai, it is hard to adequately convey ideas through words alone. "The first thing I do is show an example of what I'm trying to explain," he says. "After that, I leave it in the hands of the local residents at the center." The result has been an ongoing effort to create new and original products.

### LEARNING THROUGH SPORTS

Once every three years Oudomxay Province hosts a widely popular national sporting competition, featuring around 20 events, that brings together the top athletes from each province. In a remote region of neighboring Sainyabuli Province, two hours by car from the ancient city of Luang Prabang, JOCV members are hard at work helping prepare for the competition.

In the province's central region, energetic cries can be heard in a gymnasium where the women's provincial volleyball team practices passing, setting, and receiving during a training camp. The sharp sound of a whistle is followed by coaching

Stoles made from cotton grown in Oudomxay (left). Below, Arai smiles at product development section manager Mayphone Silivong while productivity and marketing center manager Ounkham Onphachanh looks on.



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Honma and players discuss different plays after reviewing a video of a practice match.

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don't first work on basics skills like receiving the ball and training their muscles to allow them to jump higher." Using techniques from Japan as a base, Honma has introduced practice routines covering everything from basic skills to practice games and has also incorporated drills and exercises aimed at building strength and stamina.

Many of the players are still in high school, and much as their counterparts in Japan, they put on a different face after practice, busily fidgeting with their smartphone screens as they stroll back to their dorm rooms. Back at the dormitory, however, the players stare intently as they review a video of an earlier practice match.

"You're in the wrong place in this formation," points out one player. "You need to spike the ball here, where the court is open," interjects another. The video is stopped at each notable play, with players candidly sharing their thoughts. During the session, a single voice calls to the group, saying, "Let's all buckle down and try not to make mistakes."

The players have made a tremendous amount of progress compared to when Honma first began coaching the team. In the beginning it was not unusual for players to arrive late for practice or to complain about being tired during drills. Now, players take the initiative, such as by preparing drinking water and checking that balls are properly inflated prior to beginning practice.

Honma's tenure as coach will soon come to an end. The team has enjoyed success under her watch, winning the national student championship. She gives a satisfied smile as she reflects on her time in Laos: "The Laotians supported me at every turn; even during difficult times. The experience taught me the importance of relying on others."

"To date, over 800 JOCVs have come to Laos," notes Saymonekham Mangnomek, vice-director at the Planning and Investment Ministry's Department of International Cooperation. "And we hope they will continue coming to provide their expertise." Since the beginning, JOCV participants have worked side by side with local residents. The spirit of mutual cooperation that has formed the base of the program will continue to support it as it moves forward.

JOCV member Yuiko Honma (in red) runs drills with fellow coach Thavone Khunthong.

instructions. The person directing the players is JOCV member Yuiko Honma. Having played volleyball from junior high school to university, Honma chose to participate in the volunteer program in the hope of sharing her volleyball experience with players overseas.

Honma's goal is to improve the skills and abilities of those playing volleyball inside the province. When she started, players during practice focused almost solely on spiking the ball. "The spike is ineffective as an offensive tool," she explains, "if players



Team members gather during practice for a motivating cheer.

PHOTO: KENSHIRO MAMURA

## Pioneering JOCV Participant Masako Hoshino



When I went to Laos as a volunteer in 1965, Japan was still undergoing a period of rapid economic growth. It was rare for people to travel overseas and those around me had never heard of the JOCV program.

My father, who had emigrated to Hawaii, understood the broader world outside of Japan's borders. Growing up in this environment, I was one of only a few women students to attend university, where I learned English and French. Some time later, I saw a JOCV ad while working as a Japanese teacher and decided to apply.

### Learning While Teaching

Although I went to Laos to teach Japanese, I didn't have a classroom when I arrived and wasn't able to get any students to join. This was disconcerting, but instead of letting it get me down I decided I would try and learn how to speak Lao. The marks and accolades I had earned in Japan had no value in Laos, so I had to dig down and apply myself as much as possible to get by each day. To be successful, it was essential for me to become involved in the day-to-day life of local residents.

I'm an optimist by nature and was convinced that the project would be a success. This helped to motivate me. After six months of work I was finally able to get my Japanese class up and running.

Laotians use their hearts, not money and materialistic values, to weigh the worth of things. Living and working among them made me feel that I wasn't there to teach, but to learn.



Hoshino conducting her Japanese class in a room she borrowed at a technical college.