

March 1, 2015

Dear Andrew,

I am David, the supervisor of the Toowoomba AET Ambassadors in Takatsuki, Japan. I want to thank you for publishing an article about the problems in the sister city program, and for exposing the terrible treatment these wonderful, giving people have received from both TRC and Takatsuki City. There is much more to tell.

I am from the United States, and have lived and taught in Japanese public schools in the Osaka area for the past 20 years. For the past 11 years, I have worked for Takatsuki City, in their education division, teaching, and training teachers, both Japanese schoolteachers and native English-speaking teachers. I do not exaggerate when I say that the people who come here on this Toowoomba sister city AET Ambassador program, year after year, to teach our students and to share cultural exchange, are the best group of people I have ever worked with. Anyone who says it's a holiday or an easy time for lots of money is either totally ignorant of the realities of this job, or doesn't take the job seriously.

In spite of the almost total lack of support from TRC and Takatsuki City, and in spite of the terrible housing and disrespectful treatment related to it, the Toowoomba AET Ambassadors give a 200% effort to this job. That means working full time in schools 5 days a week, plus special events, plus all kinds of cultural and community events, whether the governments of the 2 cities arrange such events for them or not. This year's group faced the most outrageous kind of treatment ever in the history of this program, yet most of them responded by doing even MORE cultural exchange, community work, donating to charities, and of course bringing knowledge and joy to thousands of school kids here in Takatsuki, as well as helping train the schoolteachers of Takatsuki City in English education. The AETs have done what they came here to do, even though there was no official support, only official neglect or harassment. I feel lucky, because I have met these good people over the past 11 years and have gained a huge respect for Australia and its people.

They, and I, do our jobs without receiving any of the standard legal benefits that workers are entitled to by law in Japan. We are in fact paid as day laborers - you miss a day of work for any reason, you lose a day's pay. We receive zero benefits. This is illegal activity by Takatsuki City and the Takatsuki City Board of Education, including violations of labor law (pardon my American spelling), housing law, tax law, and others. We have been used like workers, directed like workers, yet not taken care of like workers - and certainly not like the special "friendship partners" that TRC and Takatsuki City say the AETs are. The Toowoomba AET Ambassadors are not asking for more money; they are asking to be treated decently and equally as people.

About Monique, please allow me to say a few words. Monique just happened to be the one who sent the message that reached you. She is in no way acting or speaking alone in this, and there are easily 5 or 6 current AETs, and I believe some former AETs, who will talk with you and give you their stories. The unfair treatment in the AET Ambassador program isn't limited to one person.

About the apartments - they were disgusting, unhealthy, depressing, unsafe, and NOT CHOSEN by the AETs. Tens of thousands of dollars worth of rent money per year went into the pockets of the landlord family, and almost nothing was put into maintenance, repair, or even cleaning of the apartments since the program started 20 years ago, and I am told the buildings were considered old even back then. In May 2014, 7 of the 8 AET Ambassadors simply moved out (the AETs begin their contracts April 1st), after having their pleas for help - and the previous years' pleas - ignored by TRC, Takatsuki, and the landlord. All they did was move - justifiably to say the least, with no interruption in their work. They were in fear of being forced to stay there, and it was either move or go back to Australia, so they moved. They came here to do a meaningful job, and due to their own perseverance, they were able to do it. The backlash is way out of proportion to their move. The question is why?

The landlords and the apartment manager, it should be noted, do not speak English, and have had nothing to do with English education or Takatsuki's international programs, before or after the AET ambassadors lived in those apartments. Takatsuki City and TRC constantly refer to them as the "citizen supporters" of the program, but they are no such thing. There are, in Takatsuki, real citizen supporters of the Toowoomba AET Ambassadors, people who truly give, assist, explain, and create real bonds of international friendship. They do this without taking money from the AETs, and without any strings attached. We know who they are. They are not the officially stated "supporters."

As soon as the AETs moved out, they, and I, were attacked, harassed, and interrogated - not only by the staff of the Takatsuki mayor's office, or by the TRC, but by the staff of the Takatsuki Board of Education, which should have nothing to do with housing issues. AETs' jobs were threatened. My job was threatened.

A lot happened in between as we tried to protect ourselves, but in the end, we are all essentially being fired, all our contracts non-renewed, and the Toowoomba AET Ambassador program "suspended." The Toowoomba AETs are only one part of my job, yet the Board of Education is suddenly saying I am no longer necessary in Takatsuki. Understand that because Takatsuki City is illegally and immorally failing to enroll us as workers, we are ineligible for any benefits, such as unemployment insurance. Many AETs, of course, are left without visas. It certainly looks as if the goal is to make us all go away. Both cities have their schemes and plans. And when annoyances like laws, human decency, and fairness get in the way, their reaction is to blame good people, cover up all wrongdoing, and present the New Plan. I love the kids of Takatsuki City, and I know my attitude positively affected the already enthusiastic Toowoomba AETs, which in turn affected the Japanese homeroom teachers, which is how we maintained such a good program over the years. There are no words to express the disappointment I feel knowing that the leadership of both cities do not value it or us.

About CEO Brian Pidgeon, his statements (in the accompanying Feb 27 Chronicle article) are entirely misleading. For example, in June 2014, and again in July, the AET Ambassadors gave a long and detailed list of suggestions for improvement in every aspect of this program to TRC, as well as to the Takatsuki City mayor's office and International Association. The AETs waited and waited, asked for progress, or for when the next discussions would be, but there were none. Nothing. This entire school year (April to March) there were absolutely no talks regarding how to improve any aspect of the program - except for the ideas presented by the AETs themselves, which were ignored.

No one took the AETs' opinions or ideas or complaints seriously, or included them in any planning or review. This has always been the case every year. But this year, when Brian and TRC claim it's "the right time to review the program," it makes no sense at all to ignore and exclude the AET Ambassadors themselves - especially when the AETs GAVE A CLEAR AND DETAILED PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENT to both TRC and Takatsuki City in June. I also am excluded from any "review" of the program, though I am the one who actually knows the most about it. There was plenty of time, plenty of opportunity, and plenty of people ready and able to review and improve the program for well over a year, yet TRC and Takatsuki failed to do so. They simply stalled and then cut all of our jobs.

So, Brian's saying that this is the right time to do a review is deceitful. And his saying that the review now is "so that all parties involved can benefit" is unbelievably insensitive at best. People are being ignored, harassed, fired, losing their visas, and he is saying that all parties are benefitting? Are the AETs, and the kids of Takatsuki, and the people of the two cities, benefitting by this failure to act on basic issues, and now by the loss of the entire program for a year or longer? Is the negative image of Takatsuki and Japan that is being brought back to Australia year after year by AET Ambassadors and their friends and families a "benefit" to "all parties"? Clearly TRC is not interested in benefitting all parties.

Brian Pidgeon says, "This decision had no effect on the 12-month contracts with our existing teachers as they are due to naturally expire in March, 2015." But far from "no effect," the decision to

suspend had a HUGE affect on the current 12-month contracts. Halfway through the year, it created an atmosphere of insecurity, fear, and stress for the Toowoomba AET Ambassadors, which prevented them from fully performing their missions here. It took away our ability to contribute to planning for the future of the education and cultural programs. It took away future plans, jobs, and visas from Toowoomba's own Ambassadors; the AETs are told when hired that this is a job renewable for up to 3 years, but they were suddenly cut off during their first or second years. All parties involved were harmed.

Brian says, "We intend to meet with them when they return to discuss potential enhancements to the program." Any bets on how well those meetings will go?

He says, "There were some concerns expressed by some of the latest round of AETs surrounding the accommodation that was initially arranged for them." This wins the Understatement of the Year award. There have been numerous and serious complaints about the housing for at least 11 years!

There were major reports given to TRC and Takatsuki LAST YEAR, well before the current AET Ambassadors were sent to Japan, detailing unhealthy, unsafe, and unacceptable conditions. Moreover, Brian Pidgeon himself, as well as several Toowoomba Councilors and managers, and Mayor Antonio, came to Takatsuki and WENT INTO THESE APARTMENTS and saw and listened in person to AETs' housing issues. Nothing was done. In April 2014, five new AETs were put into the SAME apartments with uncontrollable black mould, leaking toilets, electrical shortages, gas leaks, and many more issues.

The AETs immediately and strongly wrote to TRC complaining of the apartment conditions. One AET, as a "solution" to her email detailing the filth, uncleanable mould, toilet leaking sewage, and health concerns of the apartment she had just been made to live in, received an email from TRC which consisted of a lengthy pasted-in text, lifted from some website, about "How to Clean Mould." Another AET repeatedly notified TRC and the Takatsuki International Association that there was a frightening neighbor banging loudly on the walls for no apparent reason, yet nothing was done about it. The list goes on and on. What is clear is that there was a habitual, concerted effort to keep the Toowoomba AET Ambassadors in those unfit apartments paying rent to those same landlords.

You should seriously investigate the case of the AET who, after being given the job in December 2013, informed TRC that an apartment was not needed. TRC subsequently tried to force this AET to take and pay for the apartment (pay for it even if they chose not to live in it), then threatened the AET with dismissal if the apartment wasn't paid for. In Japan, this same AET was several times approached by city officials trying to collect "rent" money for an apartment the AET had never set foot in, never taken the key for, said they didn't need, and had no lease for. It also turns out that this apartment, which Takatsuki and TRC claimed was "necessary for the program" had been unoccupied for about 2 years.

TRC knew about the apartments. Why did they repeatedly ignore and fail to support their own representatives and fellow Aussies? What benefit is there to Toowoomba by running a program this way?

And possibly most to the point regarding housing: This year's AET Ambassadors found independently, in May, much much better housing that they liked and moved into, without any interruption in their work whatsoever. They were happier, more relaxed, and able to do a much better job. The housing problem was solved - by the AETs - EARLY in their yearlong contract period. There are available apartments all over this city, and Takatsuki and TRC know this and have been informed of it for years. Problem solved - so what's the problem?

The manager of the TRC department that oversees the Sister City AET program, Dyan Currie, came to Takatsuki and saw the new apartments in early July 2014, met the new landlord of 6 AETs (and refused to talk to him or learn about Japanese housing regulations from him), and heard from these 6 AETs how happy they were in their new apartments. A TRC senior manager of the same department (sorry I'm not clear on the TRC divisions), Stuart Somers, also heard from the AETs

about their satisfaction with their new housing even earlier in the year. Why then were the 7 AETs, who moved into housing of their own choice, ignored and excluded for almost a year from any discussions of "review" or "improvement"? Why was the new landlord, who owns many nice apartments in convenient locations, maintains them superbly, and follows proper Japanese legal lease laws, totally excluded from discussions of program improvement? How do these facts fit in with Brian's claim that "all parties involved can benefit"?

Why wait a year or more, doing nothing, then say, "We need a year to review the program?"

Why did TRC never take any action whatsoever when they learned that their own AET Ambassadors' rights were being trampled and Japanese laws were being broken? There must be an explanation for TRC's behavior.

And why, at the very least, is NOT ONE BIT OF ASSISTANCE being offered to these hardworking teachers and Toowoomba representatives who have suddenly had their jobs taken away, their visas taken away, their promises broken, their lives disrupted, by the actions of TRC and Takatsuki City?

What is going on in Toowoomba and Takatsuki? How can such mismanagement occur? I'm no expert, but it looks to me as if the sister city program is being run so as to provide benefits to specific individuals in positions of influence, rather than to the public of the two cities it claims to serve. I hope not.

Please let the people of Toowoomba know that there really has been a great and beneficial AET Ambassador program for years. It's just that it has been occurring in spite of, not because of, the management of the two cities.

Thank you,
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