



Towards the immediate Rescue of All Abductees!

North Korean Human Rights Abuses Awareness Week

Essay Competition **2023**

Awarded essay



Junior High School Category 1st Prize

The Baton The Ichikawas Entrusted To Me

HASHIMA Naho

9th grade, Satsumasendai City Kedoin Junior High School

"I'm home."

"Welcome back."

There is a family near me who can't even have that casual conversation.

When I was in my first year of middle school, I watched the anime "Megumi." Megumi and her family seemed very happy. But suddenly that time was cut off by North Korea. She couldn't do ordinary things like eat her mother's home cooking or play with her siblings. My chest tightened just imagining myself in her place.

I was chosen to be a representative at the Middle School Summit on the North Korean Abduction of Japanese Citizens, organized by the government. I was frightened just recalling "Megumi," so I hesitated on whether I would be able to face this issue. My parents encouraged me with the words "it will be a good experience," and so I started learning about the abductions. While researching the initiatives up to the present day, I resolved to next consider the issue of the abductions with middle school students from around the country! However, I gave up hope of attending due to a typhoon, which was very frustrating. On the night of the summit, I watched on the news ICHIKAWA Kenichi, the older brother of ICHIKAWA Shuichi, a local Kagoshima victim of the abduction, bring up solutions to the issue near the place where the abduction took place. I wanted to meet Kenichi.

On August 30th, I was able to meet ICHIKAWA Kenichi and his wife. Kenichi adored Shuichi, who called him "big brother," and so he didn't ever think that he would suddenly no longer be able to see that little brother of his. One day after a futile 17 years of large-scale searches had passed, information was brought forth by a former spy that Shuichi was kidnapped by North Korea, and he was still alive. "As long as he's alive," his family said, crying. And they told me a story that made a deep impression. With his first paycheck, Shuichi bought his mom an Oshima tsumugi kimono, but the abduction happened and the kimono stayed in her dresser, never to be worn. His mother said she would wear it when Shuichi came back, but she died without that being fulfilled. Carrying on his parents' wishes, with the family left behind he's been fervently involved in rescue activities. Lastly, I was entrusted with this message from the Ichikawas. "Human life is so valuable, it is more important than earth. We want everyone to think that way from a young age. If someone's in trouble, help them. It may be difficult to mobilize into action, but if we can do it, it's our highest calling as humans. When we are petitioning or giving speeches, we want to etch in everyone's minds the idea of working together and chipping in and resolve to settle the abduction issue. In this life, unexpected things may happen. We want you to pause and be grateful for casual days you spend with your family. Even if people are of different opinions, the most important thing is conversation, because people's minds can be changed with conversation." The couple's words made my heart tremble greatly. From that day on, I came to hold more interest in news about the abduction issue. It's now my turn to inform everyone and pass on the baton the Ichikawas entrusted to me. Praying for ordinary days where everyone's human rights are esteemed, and being thankful for life and casual days.



Junior High School Category 2nd Prize

"For the day when we can genuinely laugh together"

NAKAMURA Meyu

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I was surprised! I didn't know such a thing happened. I watched an anime and it had a big impact on me. I'm fifteen years old now, which is very close to the age Megumi-san was when she was abducted. Just imagining being separated from my beloved family, taken on a ship, and brought to North Korea is terrifying and makes me tremble. And the feelings of the family left behind. The sad days of searching and not finding.

I wanted to know more about the abduction issue, so I searched on the internet. I learned that the main purpose of North Korea's abductions is for their operatives to impersonate Japanese people and carry out activities. And I found out that there are as many as 700 missing persons with suspicions of abduction. It makes me feel a little ashamed that I thought Japan was peaceful. There are 700 families who are living each day with the same painful feelings as Megumi-san's family.

Furthermore, Mr. Shigeru Yokota, Megumi's father, passed away in 2020 without being able to reunite with her. It is truly heartbreaking to think about how much he wanted to see his beloved daughter.

I came across an advertisement for the "Megumi and the Yokota Family Message Photo Exhibition" and happened to have some business nearby, so my family and I decided to stop by.

There, I saw photos of Megumi and her family, taken before she was abducted, where they were all smiling brightly and happily. In contrast, there were also heartbreaking photos of her father and mother, unable to hold back their tears.

What shocked me the most was the photo of Megumi's student ID from when she was abducted by North Korea. It made me realize that she was truly taken to North Korea. It felt like a crushing reality. I felt grateful that I didn't miss the opportunity to see these photos, as they made me feel much closer to the situation than just reading about it online.

However, there was one thing that concerned me. Despite it being a holiday, the visitors were all elderly people. There wasn't a single person who appeared to be a student. This is not good. We need to move the hearts of more people! Megumi is still living in North Korea. We want her to be returned to Japan as soon as possible. We need to reunite her with her waiting family, especially her elderly mother, as soon as possible. I can only imagine how much Megumi longs to see her mother... It fills my heart with sadness.

As a middle school student, is there anything I can do? Yes, there is. It is to spread the message. We need to tell as many people as possible and join forces.

At the venue, the word "会いたい" (I want to meet you) was surrounded by many small origami cranes. It was like a symbol that even small forces can become a big force when they come together.

If many people sincerely wish to meet, I believe it can definitely be realized.

For the day when we can genuinely laugh together...



Junior High School Category 2nd Prize

Thinking of Issues In A Personal Way

IKEDA Nanase

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I attended the Middle School Summit on the North Korean Abduction of Japanese Citizens held on August 10th. During that time, I attended the lecture of YOKOTA Takuya, who is the brother of the abductee YOKOTA Megumi, and was encouraged to think anew about what is needed to resolve this issue.

Before YOKOTA Takuya spoke of the events of that day, he talked about the importance of taking things in and reacting to them as though they were of personal significance to you. YOKOTA Megumi was abducted when she was 13 years old. The winter of her first year of middle school, she went to school just as normal, worked hard in her club activities, and afterwards she was kidnapped on her way home. Her home was a five-minute walk from the coastline, and her school was ten minutes further from there. Mixing in real-life geography, he spoke of the period from when Megumi was abducted to when the abduction was discovered. I got more of a sense than through the anime and literature, etc. that I was standing there at that time, and got goosebumps.

YOKOTA Takuya's lecture finished, I thought vaguely about his words while listening to the explanation of the next work. I realized suddenly that I had not been viewing Megumi and Takuya with pity; I felt genuine heartbreak for them. It was a completely different feeling than when I watched the anime or read books relating to the kidnapping. That was the first time I thought of this problem directly as my own.

I wondered if I normally took issues that habitually occur as my own issues. Thinking about the fact that same-sex marriage is still not recognized, or watching tragic events on the news, I might feel sorry or sympathetic, but I wouldn't take these issues in as my own. Wasn't that because I only knew about these things on a surface level? So what should I do to take things in a more personal way? Only the people involved know what something really feels like. However, I can become aware. Just like when I listened to the events of the kidnapping and did my own research, I was able to think about the issue as a problem that I was involved in.

There is something called the color bath effect. It says that whatever you concern yourself with naturally comes into view in your daily life. You are keeping in mind that problems like this exist. If there's something relating to these problems online and in the news, they'll surely catch your attention. I believe that this way, by coming in contact with the problem a little bit every day, the issue will feel personal and close to you.

Next it is your turn to convey it to someone else. Speak to friends and family, or try posting about it online. By widening the circle of interest that way, more people might consider it as their own issue, which may lead to resolution of the problem.



High School Category 1st Prize

Inheritance: Learning from YOKOTA Shigeru's Conviction

IKEDA Kazune

11th grade, Eishin Junior and Senior High School

"I want to see my daughter." With that sole intent, he stood on the street with his wife Sakie as longtime representative and founder of the Association of Families of Victims Abducted by North Korea. They went to schools nationwide and spoke 1,400 times.

But his wish wasn't granted. 43 years have passed since his daughter Megumi, who was 13 years old at the time, was kidnapped to North Korea. YOKOTA Shigeru, who held close to him the comb that Megumi gave him as a birthday present, passed away in June of 2020 at age 87.

I always considered this too-depressing issue of abduction through Shigeru. On TV, he gave the impression of being calm and gentle. Even when public opinion and lobbying regarding North Korea leaned towards the radical, Shigeru's voice, figure and comments were calm and I felt that he honored a dialogue-driven resolution. And through Shigeru, the abduction issue came to be taken as a significant human rights violation issue.

In the past the Yokotas were divided in opinion on whether or not to publicize Megumi's name. There was the fear that if they publicly announced her name, she might be killed by North Korea. However, Shigeru concluded that it was feeble to bring her to public attention as "Y.M.", and decided to publicly announce her name. As a father, he had the strong determination to get back his daughter unconditionally.

Shigeru liked to take photos of his family as a subject matter. In the numerous photographs that appeared in the anime "Megumi" (Government Headquarters for Countermeasures Against the Abduction of Japanese by North Korea), I felt the overflowing love Shigeru had for Megumi. For Shigeru, capturing his family on camera was a happy part of his daily life. But this was suddenly lost to him. Shigeru stopped taking photos after that day.

When I heard of Shigeru's passing, I felt a sense of urgency. At this rate, it wouldn't just be the victims' families who'd pass away, but the victims themselves. I get the sense that North Korea is waiting for that to happen.

It feels as though interest in this issue is declining within Japan. That feels dangerous to me. It may be trite, but I think that if all people in Japan continued to hold strong interest in this issue, and every single person kept expressing the opinion that they would under no circumstances give up this issue of human rights violation, it would lead to Shigeru's conviction and actions being passed on, and make North Korea budge.

In October of 2002, five abductees including HASUIKE Kaoru returned to Japan. At that time, Megumi's death was announced, and Shigeru wailed without shrinking from the public gaze, which was unlike himself. But Shigeru, as the representative of the association of families, said considerately, "The families of those who were fine, please be joyful without feeling the need to hold back." I respect Shigeru's sense of responsibility, kindness and courage from the bottom of my heart. I also want to become someone like that.

HASUIKE Kaoru said this: "No matter what it takes, we must have all abductees brought back to Japan while their parents' generation is still living." That is exactly what I think. This issue and no other is my matter.



High School Category 2nd Prize

My Strengths

KIGOSHI Mio

11th grade, Keiai Gakuen Senior High School

I wonder how many people know that there are said to be more than 500 victims of the "Abductions of Japanese citizens from Japan by agents of the North Korean government." To be honest, I did not know about it until I researched the issue in preparation for writing this essay. It is also reported that the abductees are from over a dozen countries, not just Japan. As someone who is not directly involved in the abduction issue, I believe that I can do what I can now to convey to future generations the vileness and seriousness of the issue and the necessity of resolving it. I would be happy if this essay contributes to that effort.

I watched the movie "Megumi" which is about the abduction issue a second time this year. While feeling anger and frustration at the fact that the abductions have apparently not been stopped, I was also moved by the devotion of the families of the abductees. This year, however, in addition to the feelings I had last year, I wondered if I could somehow be of help to the victims. After watching the film, I had a discussion with the club members, and many of them expressed their desire to help the abductees as I did, and also expressed their opinions on how to solve the issue, saying, "In addition to this essay contest, I would like to actively participate in any other activities related to the abduction issue and share my thoughts and ideas," "After entering university, I want to start a club to discuss the issue of the abductions and create a place where more people can learn about it." and so on.

Due to the advancing age of the victims' families and the COVID-19 epidemic, their activities have been significantly less vigorous than in the past. In these current circumstances, the ability of young people to send out messages is becoming more and more crucial. There are many things that can be done, such as the ongoing petition drives and public advocacy campaigns held on the streets. With that in mind, in addition to the continuation of the essay contest in the future, opportunities such as theatrical performances and speeches would be additional avenues of action. In addition, if more schools screen the movie "Megumi" in their classes and club activities, more young people will seriously consider what they can do to help, just as I became interested in the abduction issue after watching the movie for the first time last year and became educated on the issue through my own research, I believe. Oral communication, "my weapon of choice", is a very powerful tool for disseminating my thoughts and feelings to my intended audience. Through my speeches, I would like to share with the audience the meaning of my activism regarding the abduction issue, my ideas for a solution, and my wish that all the people of Japan confront the issue of the abductions together.

I believe that if people who are not affected by the abductions take an interest in the current situation, even if it is small at first, and if enough people take up the cause, it will eventually move the government and bring it one step closer to resolving the problem. November 15th, the day Ms. Megumi Yokota was abducted by North Korea, also happens to be my birthday. While I am surrounded by friends and family members congratulating me, the world is shrouded in an atmosphere of sadness and anger due to the media coverage of the abductions. I have mixed feelings every year when I see it happen. It is my heartfelt wish that November 15th becomes a day when everyone in the world is surrounded by happiness.



High School Category 2nd Prize

Having A Go At The Problem of North

SUZUKI Toshiaki

10th grade, Seibudai Chiba High School

46 years have passed since the North Korean Human Rights and Abduction of Japanese Citizens issue happened. How many people know of this issue and incident, and how many people are taking an interest in it? And do you know about the North Korean Human Rights Violations Public Awareness Week? I only had the faint recollection that something like that had happened. My assignment over summer break to think about it was the beginning. I saw the government countermeasures headquarters website and videos, as well as watched anime and read books. YOKOTA Megumi's voice shouting, "Dad! Mom!" in the anime "Megumi" remained constantly in my ears.

I have an older sister who was in the badminton club in middle school. My mother was born in 1977, the year that the abduction occurred. The keywords that come up somehow or other seem to link my family to the incident in a way that makes my chest feel hollow. It was inconceivable how foul, cruel, and heartbreaking it was. This problem is in the present progressive form. The people involved in the incident bear deep wounds, which rather than being healed, continue to bleed even now.

Next, I read the essays written by middle and high schools students up to now. Everyone thought as I do. Our generation's lack of understanding and awareness, and the fading of the abductions in our memories are the problem. The family association formed by the families of the victims is active all over Japan as well as abroad, devoting their energies to resolving the problem as urgently as possible. However, this historical, significant and international incident that happened in Japan is fading.

From here on, we must think of ways we can begin to address the issue. We can begin in a grassroots way, by studying about it in classes such as social studies and integrated studies. Sharing with peers in the classroom, and deepening awareness and understanding that way. And just like how there's a Human Rights Week, we should spread awareness of the North Korean Human Rights Violations Public Awareness Week I mentioned in the beginning widely. Combined with that, we could distribute blue ribbons to elementary, middle, high school and university students in Japan, heightening their awareness by having them wear it on their bodies. Besides this, making use of media and social networks and collaborations, etc., spreading information in a diverse way. We could start activities that go with the times. Any trivial thing is fine. It is necessary to see this and let it soak in that the North Korean Human Rights and Abduction of Japanese Citizens issue is still unresolved.

In Japan's history, on top of the accumulated hours of each person's life, we are alive. Through the kidnapping of Megumi from her beloved family 46 years ago, the lives of the whole family spun out of order, their peaceful daily life stolen from them. We cannot forget that the human rights we should protect everyone's individual existence and an indispensable right to have freedom and a happy life. We want this issue to be resolved immediately, for everyone to return to Japan, and for everyone to live and experience happiness. We ourselves want to better Japan and protect the smiles of the people important to us. The time for our generation to step up and address the problem of North Korea is now.



English Essay Junior High School Category 1st Prize

Our solution

TANI Sota

9th grade, Kumamoto Prefectural Uto Junior High School

A couple who wished to be as happy as possible. It was a simple wish, but one day that happiness was suddenly shattered. They can't see, talk or even be near each other, The Yokota family has actually had to deal with such a harsh situation. It is impossible for us to understand how much hard they felt.

In the 2017 public opinion poll on foreign affairs released by the Cabinet Office 40 years after the abduction of Megumi Yokota, 78.3% of respondents cited the issue of Japanese abductions, falling below 80% for the first time and the become lowest since 2002. I found that particularly younger people were not interested in the issue, and I tried to found out why the level of interest had declined. I believe it is the bias of media coverage on nuclear issues. I want you to look up "North Korea News" on the Internet right now. It is the clear evident that most of the coverages are on the nuclear issues, but very few articles on abductions. So I believe what is important for young people is the opportunities to learn about abductions. There are two specific ways to take advantage of these opportunity.

First, we should have discussions with people around us. By talking about the abduction issues with friends or family members, we can exchange opinions and deepen our interests in the issues and exchange correct information. In fact, my class had time to learn and exchange ideas in civic class. In the class, we had several ways to exchange our opinions, and found contradictions between the general opinions and the emotional opinions. Discussions give us the benefit of increasing concreteness and making it easier to take action.

Second, we should actively participate in awareness-raising activities. In fact, I did not know much about abductions until I studied them. However, my teacher taught us abduction issues and I became interested in them, which gave me the opportunity to look into them deeply. So I think it is wonderful to participate in something like this contest that can teach us a lot and even others.

In a world where compassion often fades amidst daily routines, the story of the Yokota family stands as a poignant reminder of the fragility of happiness and the need for unwavering empathy. Their heartrending experience serves as a call to action for each of us to transcend our own concerns and engage earnestly with issues that shape lives beyond our own. By breaking the cycle of apathy through genuine discussions and active participation, we can infuse our generation with a renewed sense of responsibility, awakening the potential for positive change and a brighter future.

There is a limitation to what we can do, but there is a great value in what we can do. We, students, can do what I told you. At the end of this essay, I will tell all of you that I will sustain my curiosity, try hard to spread knowledge about the abduction issues to people around the world, and contribute to the solution.



English Essay Junior High School Category 2nd Prize

Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea

Elio ESPOSITO

7th grade, AOBA-JAPAN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

November 15, 1977, was like any other ordinary school day for a thirteen-year-old girl named Megumi Yokota who lived in Niigata. Megumi walked home from school after her badminton practice but she didn't come home and was never heard from again.

As I consider myself a normal thirteen-year-old student living in Japan, I can't imagine the fear and pain that Megumi's family must have experienced. I wonder if Megumi herself could even comprehend what was happening to her and when she would learn that the strangers who abducted her were North Korean spies.

At the time, the former North Korean leader Kim Jong-il gave the green light for a program to abduct Japanese citizens. This decision resulted in seventeen Japanese citizens being abducted. The purpose of this program was to use Japanese abductees to assist the agents in the North Korean Reconnaissance General Bureau ("RGB") with Japanese language and culture so they could be more effective spies. They also stole the abductee's identity when they travelled abroad on missions.

Megumi was the first abductee taken in Japan by North Korea in 1977. In subsequent years another sixteen Japanese citizens were abducted plus an unknown number of people from various countries including South Korea, China, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Romania, France, Lebanon and Italy. My own family originated in Italy and Japan so was shocking to learn that abductees were taken from both countries and could easily have been members of my family.

It was not until September 17, 2002, that the North Korean government admitted and apologized for thirteen abductions of Japanese citizens. The North Korean government made this announcement to normalize relations with the Japanese government. The North Koreans also acknowledged that only five abductees were still alive and would be returned. Unfortunately, Megumi was said to have died in 1994 however her family cannot accept this information without evidence. Many of the other families of abductees who were said to have died feel the same way as Megumi's family.

Since 2002, there hasn't been any significant progress regarding this North Korean abduction issue despite ongoing Japanese public interest. Despite the complexity of this issue, I still believe a solution is possible. Similar to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Japan and North Korea could arrange a similar commission for abductees and their families. Such talks should focus on the truth, not to blame or punish those responsible. Only through the truth will the victims and their families find some peace and closure.

In conclusion, these abductions are an unresolved but important issue for the Japanese people. Despite the political challenges, I believe the only solution involves disclosing the truth about what happened to each abductee. I hope one day the truth will be revealed including that of Megumi.



English Essay High School Category 1st Prize

To my helpless self

OKUDA Ria

11th grade, Osaka Prefectural Suito Kokusai Junior & Senior High School

"It is okay because Japan is at peace."

I think somewhere in the back of my mind I was thinking like that. No one can imagine that their beloved family would disappear the day after their birthday. However, that is what actually happened to Megumi Yokota and her family.

Watching the anime "Megumi" triggered me to think deeply about the North Korea abduction issue. Even though I could not truly understand the heartache, I was able to put myself in their shoes. It is easy to imagine that both I and my family would suffer if my family became victims or if I became a victim myself. My mother also likes to take pictures and record her experiences, so there was an overlap with Megumi's father, who often took pictures. I felt from the bottom of my heart that this should never happen.

"What do you think we should do to get them back?" When my teacher asked me, I thought even if a complete solution was difficult, I thought it was possible to take a step toward a solution or to prevent it. I have two ways to do this.

The first is to build community ties. I think it is important to have local connections and watchful eyes in order to prevent not only abductions but also kidnappings. Ms. Megumi was abducted in a secluded place. A system that notifies people that they have left school when they return home may seem a bit cumbersome, but I thought it would be good to utilize such a system as well, since we believe it also prevents incidents.

The second is to communicate the information without letting it fade away. I think that the fading away of the incident is the worst thing that can happen to the victims' families and in terms of the prevention of future incidents. Megumi's brother also said, "The thing I fear the most is the fading away of the incident."

Also, in "Megumi," what impressed me was Megumi's mother's comment, "I don't hold grudges against the North Koreans, I just want them back. Even with the abduction and missile issues, it is not okay to hate North Korea as a whole." Simply hating North Korea will not solve anything, and only time will pass. Since this is a problem between countries, I felt that it is important for the people of the country to raise their voices together. In addition, in "Megumi," I was also impressed by the fact that passersby ignored the flyers of the victims' families. We must not think that it is irrelevant, but think of it as if it were our own matter and raise our voices.

It is easy to think that we cannot do anything because we are powerless. However, that will not change anything. It is important to actively communicate with local people and schools, to use systems to ensure safety, and to be very aware of the abduction issue and communicate it.



English Essay High School Category 2nd Prize

“With the world ~What we can do as high school students~”

TANAKA Yuki

10th grade, Shukutoku Senior High School

I don't want to tell a lie, so I'll tell what I honestly think about “the abduction.”

I knew that North Korea had abducted Japanese people in the past, but I didn't have much interest in it.

At such time, my mother showed me the movie “Megumi.” I watched the anime at 1.5x speed. However, now that I think about it, I am ashamed of myself and wonder why I acted in such a way without thinking about the abductees or the person who made the movie.

When I learned about what happened to Megumi on the day of her abduction, and I imagined the fear she felt at that time, I felt anger and pain. After watching that movie, something in my heart clearly changed.

A while later, I knew there was a lecture by Sakie Yokota, Megumi's mother, so I attended the lecture and met her for the first time. After hearing her story directly, I felt that she has never given up and is living every minute of her life strongly. On the other hand, she seemed like a normal person to me. In other words, people who were living a normal life just like me suddenly became victims.

Apart from this lecture, when I heard the words of the family of Miyoshi Soga, another abductee, I realized that it wasn't just an abductee that was robbed, but also very precious time. Even if the abductees return to Japan, the precious time will never come back. I realized that they had been robbed of all the time such as time around the table with family and time with friends at school.

Now that I understand the feelings of abductees and their families more deeply, what can I, a high school student, do for them?

I am currently studying abroad. Far away from Japan, I am thinking about “the abduction”

and imagine what the abductees and their families feel, and wondering what I can do.

I believe that most Japanese have the same feelings about “the abductions” no matter where they are. Or rather, this feeling should be shared all over the world. However, I suppose that many people in the world don't know about “the abduction.” I asked my homestay family and friends from countries other than Japan if they knew about “the abduction.” Their answer was “No.”

In Japan, everyone knows about “the abduction.” However, I realized that there are many people outside of Japan who don't know about it.

Therefore, I believe that talking about “the abduction” with my friends and teachers in countries other than Japan and thinking about positive solutions together with people around the world is what I can do as a high school student.

I believe that we should not only face the issue of “the abduction” within Japan, but the entire world. Let's do our best and never give up until the end.



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