“Gathering Place” for young people, a local hub to overcome difficulties of living

- Example of Practice at “Youth Room” and “Café Waigaya” of Kunitachi Kominkan -

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Brief Introduction of Kunitachi City

● Located almost in the heart of Tokyo, the 4th smallest in Japan and the 2nd smallest in Tokyo with an area of 8.15km².
● The northern part of the city is designated as academic district. The city has been developed around the « University Avenue » which runs north to south and divides the Hitotsubashi University, with a view to creating a beautiful urban landscape.
● Current population is about 75,000.
● There is only one Kominkan in the northern part of the city.
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1. The Histories of “the Youth Room” and Café “Wai-wai Gaya-gaya”

- 1953: Young People’s Special Class Promotion Law
- 1955: Kunitachi Community Center in Tokyo was opened.
- 1960: Commerce and Industry Class for the Young started. (A leisure activity for working youths, that were called “Golden Eggs.”)
- 1967: The Youth Classroom was established.
- 1970’s: Stagnation in the Youth Classroom activities. “A gathering place” activity started, which was looser than a learning with “set goals”. This activity started to include young people with disabilities.
- 1980: The Youth Class for the Disabled was established.
- 1981: Café “Wai-wai Gaya-gaya” was opened.

⇒ Based on young people’s activities, those with disabilities joined. Changing its targets and forms, the activities have continued up to the present.
2. Overview of Activities and Their Cross Relationships

- Class for young people with disabilities
- Independent Clubs (Bread making, hiking, etc.)
- Joint Activities (Sakura viewing, etc.)
- Youth Seminar
- Café Waigaya
Class for young people with disabilities

Independent Clubs (Bread making, hiking, etc.)

Youth Seminar

Joint Activities (Sakura viewing, etc.)

Café Waigaya
Class for young people with disabilities

- Leisure and cultural activities for young people with disabilities living or working in Kunitachi City. The class is usually held once in a month on a weekday night.

- Sports/Craft/Cooking/Café training/Pottery/Eurhythmics/YYW (= a class where participants plan and realize what they want to do).

- The class is organized by Kominkan’s staff and volunteers (students and workers) and offers a place for the volunteers to interact with people with disabilities (called “members”).
Class for young people with disabilities

Independent Clubs (Bread making, hiking, etc.)

Youth Seminar

Joint Activities (Sakura viewing, etc.)

Café Waigaya
Café Waigaya

● Managed by a citizen group “Association for mutual self-independence beyond disabilities (supported by 140 persons)

● Open from Tuesday to Sunday between 12:00 to 18:00. About 15 volunteer staff mainly in their 10’s to 30’s (students, workers, housewives) work in rotation.

● Place of practice for Café Training Course in “Class for young people with disabilities.”

● Daily sales is about 6,000 yen while an average of 200-500 yen is paid to the staff. No staff works full-time and makes a living at Café Waigaya.
Class for young people with disabilities

Independent Clubs
(Bread making, hiking, etc.)

Youth Seminar

Joint Activities
(Sakura viewing, etc.)

Café Waigaya
Youth Seminar

Seminar for citizens organized by young people who frequent “Youth Room” and the Kominkan’s staff.

<Example>
- Seminar for discussing labor problems of young people
- Seminar on Indian music
- Etching workshop

You can see our activities on Facebook. Please search “Kunitachi Coffee House”.
Class for young people with disabilities

Independent Clubs (Bread making, hiking, etc.)

Café Waigaya

Youth Seminar

Joint Activities (Sakura viewing, etc.)

* “Café Waigaya” is a place of practice for Café Training Course of “Class for young people with disabilities.”

* “Members” who participate in “Class for young people with disabilities” often come to Café Waigaya for a cup of coffee.

* “Staff” of “Café Waigaya” plan and organize “Youth Seminar.”

* Participants of “Youth Seminar” become “staff” of “Café Waigaya.”
3. Characteristics of Activities and Participation of Young People with Difficulties

- Combination of “Activities with theme” and “Gathering place without purpose.”

  ⇒ Young people with different backgrounds get together through different channels and they can get involved in the activities at their own pace.

- Participants are limited to young people.

  ⇒ “Members” with disabilities and volunteers without disabilities can discuss at the same level to carry out the activities.

  ⇒ These characteristics expand the possibilities of the activities with people with disabilities and enable the participation by young people who have or had problems of “social withdrawal” or “school refusal” and who have mental illness. The activities also help these young people to overcome their own “difficulties” to some degree.
4. Function as a « Place for Recovering Self-Confidence »

A case of Ms. F, former staff of “Café Waigaya”

● She stopped going to high school because of sickness when she was the second grader and dropped out when in the third grade.

● In days of suffer, she found information on “Bread Club” (Youth Seminar : Bread-making seminar) in the Kominkan’s monthly newsletter.

● On the day of the seminar, she was more worried than excited before leaving home, but thanks to the cheers from her family, she was able to participate in the seminar and enjoy bread-making without feeling nervous.

● She felt, “This place might suit me,” and started to participate in the activities of “Café Waigaya.”
She says about her activities at Café Waigaya, “Gradually, I came to be able to make coffee alone with confidence. I attended a monthly Waigaya discussion and had a sense of responsibility and fulfillment when my opinion was reflected in the management of Waigaya. I felt cheerful and positive when our customers said “It’s great…!” with a smile while drinking my coffee.”

● As her opinions and coffee were accepted and she was relied on by a lot of staff and customers she got involved with, she slowly recovered her confidence and started to think “I want to make even a small step forward.”

● Later on, she passed an examination for high school diploma and entered a regional university. She is now aiming to become a teacher.
Youth Room and Café Waigaya attract many young people who have problems of “social withdrawal” or “school refusal” and who have mental illness. They have become places where they are accepted and build or rebuild self-confidence and self-esteem through relationships with people having various backgrounds.

= Place for recovering self-confidence (increasing resilience)

This function is made possible by...

● Long years of activities carried out by young people with and without disabilities through discussions beyond different backgrounds.

Meanwhile...

● It is necessary to remember that the purpose of the activities is not to acquire the “ability to make friends with everyone.” It is important to keep a comfortable distance from persons with whom one doesn’t have a good chemistry or not to participate in the same activity with them.
5. Youth Problems in present-day Japan

- Since the late 1990’s, Japan has seen young people becoming the socially vulnerable due to a structural change of the society.

- Increasingly competitive job market and a growing number of temporary jobs have made it difficult for young people to find a stable job after graduation and produced those who are called “Freeter” (Part-time jobber) or “NEET”(young people Not in Education, Employment or Training). They are not able to be independent from parents, create a family and participate in the society because of unemployment or poverty and this phenomenon has been considered as a social problem.

- While various measures of self-independence support for young people have been implemented in the fields of labor and welfare since the 2000’s, few measures have been taken in the field of social education.
6. Comparison with «Self-Independence Support for Young People» - Part 1

In Japan, various target services for young people with difficulties, such as “job assistance” and “assistance for social withdrawal,” have been expanded. There is, however, little universal social participation service open to a wider range of young people that offers a “social gathering place” and “intermediate employment” like those offered by our Café Waigaya.

→Kunitachi Kominkan will increase its efforts to ensure social participation for those who need a “gathering place” other than home, school or work where they can build relationships in the local community.
The characteristic of "job assistance" and "assistance for social withdrawal" for young people is "individual assistance approach" in which consultations and guidance are provided on an individual basis in response to the needs of individuals.

On the other hand, the characteristic of the activities in Kunitachi Kominkan is "group assistance approach" in which young people who are excluded from job opportunities and social communities increase their resilience through participation in "activities with theme" and continuous stay at a "gathering place without purpose" where they can establish various relationships over a long time.
We are currently implementing the “Project for supporting the social participation of young people with difficulties of self-independence” within the framework of the “Program for supporting the revitalization of social education in Kominkan” implemented by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, based on our practices accumulated over the years with people with disabilities.

→The “self-independence” that we, Kunitachi Kominkan consider is not a total “independence” from others but an “interdependence” which means behaving proactively while relying on others.
7. Role of (Kunitachi) Kominkan in Social Participation Support

Contents and stage of self-independence covered by our activities:

- Medical and welfare assistance
- Job training, assistance for returning to school
- Assistance for participation in local activities (or for intermediate employment), provision of learning opportunities
- Creation of a “gathering place,” consultations with persons having difficulties
- Family consultations, assistance for improvement of motivation for living

Various forms of social participation:

- Job assistance, internship
- Work independence
- Social independence
- Daily-life independence
8. Future Challenges

- Participation in “gathering place” has been actually limited to young people who had a chance to know its existence or who were able to access independently. We will thus increase the number of channels to “be connected” with the place by promoting participation assistance for young people who are particularly isolated and suffer from difficulties of living.

- We will establish networks with assistance providers and related organizations in a wide range of fields to respond to the needs of young people having difficulties and problems.

- We will not report the apparent achievements of the activities only from the viewpoint of Kominkan’s staff, but encourage young people who participated in the activities to tell their own empowered experience by themselves.