

Interview with Caitlin Puzzar, English teacher

A Young Social Entrepreneur Fights Against Child Abuse in Japan

By *Japan SPOTLIGHT*

Social entrepreneurship is always a locomotive for social reform and evolution. The Japan Institute for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship (JSIE: www.jsie.net) helps and encourages women in Japan to bridge the gap between their potential and reality. Caitlin Puzzar, born in England and now working in Japan as an English teacher, is also a social entrepreneur supported by JSIE. In the following interview she discusses her experiences and innovations.

(Interviewed on Dec. 7, 2021)

Self-Introduction

JS: First of all, I would like to know how you became interested in Japan and how you ended up coming here to teach English.

Puzzar: When I was in England at high school, I was a volunteer police cadet, and have always been interested in volunteering. When I went to Keele University I studied criminology, and I was also able to study a language, so I chose Japanese to try and challenge myself. It was while I was writing my dissertation, which focused on child online exploitation and how to protect children now that the world is more interconnected, that my Japanese teacher understood I was passionate about children and helping them. She suggested to me the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, which invites young native English speakers from around the world to teach English at Japanese schools. She thought I would be a good fit for the job because I care about children, and she also knew that I had lots of volunteering experience and that I liked giving back to communities. That was the main reason why I decided to come to Japan, as I hoped that through teaching children I would be able to educate them on a foreign culture and give back in some way, whilst also educating myself. I had spent my whole life in the United Kingdom, and I wanted to really understand what it is like to be a minority in a country, because I had never experienced that. All of those factors together were the reasons why I chose to go on the JET program. Hopefully the JET program will benefit me when I move forward in the next stage of my career; and all the things I have learned from Japan I hope to share with people when I go back to my country.



Caitlin Puzzar

JS: How do you like Japanese children?

Puzzar: I love them, they are the sweetest children; so kind, so energetic and so willing to learn new things, which I didn't expect them to accept so openly. I think Japanese children are so respectful and I think that's an amazing quality to have. That's why I feel strongly about protecting them even more. Working with Japanese children has given me greater respect for teachers in England, too.

JS: Are you teaching elementary school students?

Puzzar: I teach a variety; I currently teach at one junior high school, and two elementary schools, but I teach at a preschool and a Special Support High School for handicapped children as well. So I teach all ages.

JS: And you like all the children regardless of their age?

Puzzar: Yes, definitely. Of course, it requires a different skill set – I have younger cousins myself so I can relate to the junior and elementary students very well, but it has also been educational for me to experience teaching children of all ages, because of course when I was their age the world was very different. It is great for me to educate myself in what the older children are interested in and concerned about – so it's really beneficial for me as well to work here.

Child Abuse in Japan

JS: How did you get interested in child abuse in

Japan? I ask this question because I knew very little about child abuse in Japan, and my feeling would be that child abuse is somewhat unusual here.

Puzzar: I think obviously with my background and my interests I do try to keep up to date with news stories, and timing-wise I was experiencing something in school that I didn't agree with, but I understood that in Japan maybe the culture is different and so are the systems in place. For example, in the work environment I know that I am most likely the lowest-ranking person in the staff room. Often I would be in the staff room alone, and I could walk around teachers' desks, and I could see lots of student welfare questionnaires. I thought "This is private information with answers from students and I shouldn't be able to see this, but I can." It was at that exact time that there was also the case of Mia Kurihara in Chiba. When she was in school and taking the school welfare questionnaire she actually told the school that her father had been abusing her. I was so shocked when I read the news reports about how the school had given the father the questionnaire results, because in my country that would never happen.

Those two events really stayed with me and bothered me, but I didn't really know what I could do to fix the problem. In May 2019 JSIE organized the Kumamoto Women's Initiative for Sustainable Empowerment (WISE) event. When I attended that event, I didn't honestly think many people would care about this issue. I proposed that we should do something about child abuse and to my surprise lots of people in the room were very supportive towards me, and through that event is how we initially came up with the idea of creating Guardian, an application to detect issues such as child abuse and bullying.

JS: You studied criminology at university. Did that perhaps encourage you to study this issue?

Puzzar: Absolutely. Initially, when I was in Japan and I was hearing this information, I was feeling frustrated and really discouraged because these stories were angering me, but I felt powerless and helpless to do anything about them. Through the JSIE event, I realized that many people were very supportive of my idea, and maybe the fact that I am a foreigner enables me to say things that Japanese people can't say, push boundaries a little bit more and use my foreignness to the advantage of Japanese children.

JS: You mentioned that the public sector in Japan is not well organized in taking care of this issue.

Puzzar: Of course, in Britain we do have a very different public sector system, and in my opinion the public sector in Japan doesn't receive as much government assistance as it should. I do feel that the focus is on the older generations because Japan has an aging population, and there is, as I see it, the belief that many children are taken care

of by their parents and by their families, so the government doesn't need to push as much funding into them compared to the older generations. As well, Japan had the G20 Summit in Osaka in 2016, and SDGs recently have become so prominent – one of them was in regards to education and strengthening efforts to provide quality education, and to create inclusive societies. That surprised me because I didn't think they were actually doing so. To me, creating an inclusive society also includes supporting the children who might potentially be being abused or bullied, so I do feel that they really should be pushing to make changes incorporating SDGs, to try and assist the NPOs that are doing a lot of work on many different issues. One of these issues being education – that is the key to changing things and I think that the funding should be going towards more education about these issues.

JS: Not only child abuse, but also pet abuse is attracting attention in Japan.

Puzzar: I had never seen so many stray animals as I had before I came to Japan, so I was surprised by that too. Animal abuse is something I'm not as well versed in, but is definitely an issue that needs to be addressed.

JS: In the last five years or so, Japanese people seem to have started paying attention to these issues – child abuse, animal abuse, and welfare-related issues.

Puzzar: This is such a crucial time for us and JSIE who I am working with on this project, to continue to push Guardian as much as we can. People are starting to realize now that this is an issue that needs to be tackled and they seem to be a lot more open to discussing these topics compared to previously.

JS: How do you assess the triggers for child abuse in Japan, compared with your country's situation?

Puzzar: Generally, with child abuse in Britain there's a variety of causes. Often it can be if the child has disabilities – whether learning disabilities or physical disabilities, or other health problems. Of course, socio-economic status too plays a part – such as if there is unemployment and high social stress. I do believe that Britain and Japan really do have quite similar stresses that can cause child abuse; we all know that Japanese people work extremely long hours, and there are a lot of stay-at-home mothers which puts pressure on them. We have seen that the suicide rate for children in Japan is one of the highest in the world. I think that this year there was about a 30% increase compared to last year, which is absurd. This proves that the issues they face are only continuing to get worse, and we really do need to tackle these issues because children are one of the most important parts of society. They are going to grow up, and

potentially change the system and change the world. If we can't help them at such a young age when they are blossoming, then are we really doing anything for society as a whole? I don't think we are. It is obviously a difficult subject, but I do feel that in Britain especially, we do have a lot of celebrities who raise awareness about these issues, and through their following, push things to the government and try to make a change. However, in my experience – maybe because I don't pay enough attention to Japanese celebrities – I don't believe that in Japan they use their fame and influence in a way that could help to tackle some of these issues and raise awareness of them.

JS: Japan used to be a country well known for taking good care of its children, in a maternalistic sense. However, it is also a very stressful society.

Puzzar: Yes, living here is stressful for me, and even if I am not stressed myself I can feel it from other people. I do feel especially in Japan, more so than in Britain, you have such an amazing group culture – you are very supportive of others, and I see it acting as somewhat of a familial community. A workplace is like a family as well, and I feel that as a result of that – even though it is an amazing cultural aspect – if something is different or if something is a problem maybe people don't talk about it so much because they don't want to be seen as different or as a problem. This group culture is also prevalent in schools which brings about things like bullying. If there is abuse going on, maybe people are suspecting it but less likely to report it because they don't want to ruin relationships or affect other aspects of their lives. So I think it's a double-edged sword: it is an amazing quality but also causes issues whereby people don't want to ruin that group dynamic and maybe wouldn't necessarily report things or act upon things in the way they would in Britain, where we don't have such an ingrained group culture.

Experience of Kumamoto City

JS: You are now living in Kumamoto – a regional city so perhaps slightly different from Tokyo. Are people kinder, or more warm-hearted?

Puzzar: Yes, there really is a community feeling here, and that is why I love Kumamoto so much. I have been living here for five-and-a-half years and it really is my second home. The people are so warm here, and I think that is why issues in schools such as child abuse and so on can be difficult to address. Kumamoto has always been so warm to me, but on occasions when I bring up something that is a little taboo or something they don't want to talk about, they can become a little cold. But of course, that is to do with being in a slightly more conservative city. I understand and respect that, but it is just another challenge that JSIE and I are working through with the Guardian App

at the moment.

Pandemic & Child Abuse

JS: We are now still in a pandemic, and the suicide rate seems to be rising in Japan, and maybe everywhere in the world. The pandemic has negative psychological impacts on people, but how about child abuse? Do you think this has been rising due to the pandemic?

Puzzar: I really do think so. Of course, there have been studies about the suicide rate and even though the overall suicide rate has been declining in recent years, the number of child suicides has been peaking year on year. I know that child abuse is not necessarily monitored in the same way as suicide. I think that there is no way that you cannot consider child abuse as part of the reasons for the suicide rate increasing; especially last year, we had two months when children were doing online classes and were at home for extended periods. Many students go to school to escape from their home life, which they couldn't do during those two months. Because there was no in-person contact with teachers, the teachers could not detect any potential issues that they could usually detect in real life at school. Also, there were lots of mothers and fathers working from home, which is an environment that they have probably never worked in before, which causes lots of stress. Children were studying at home, family members were trying to work at home, and especially with the state of emergencies too, people were not able to meet others and had a lack of freedom. All of these can be seen as precursors to increased frustration and anger.

So I truly believe the pandemic has played a significant role in the increase of child abuse. Although we haven't had any reports published yet about those figures, I think we can really look at the suicide rates in children and can make assumptions by ourselves. Depression in children was increasing during the pandemic, and a lot of students did have suicidal thoughts; it is proven that a lot of depression and suicides are caused by bullying, child abuse, and low-quality home lives. There is an NPO in Tokyo called "Three Keys", which set up a website for junior high and high school students to discuss bullying and suicidal thoughts. Of course, that is great, except for the fact that it is something that they have to do on their own. There is no system in place that is providing an opportunity for students to reach out like we are with Guardian. The Guardian App can be used in school or at home, it is a regular piece of software used to detect mental health, bullying or child abuse issues, to name a few. Currently the only resources in place seem to be ones that students have to reach out to by themselves. If child abuse is occurring, maybe the parents aren't allowing them access to the Internet so they cannot reach out. Maybe the children are worrying about posting this information in case the abuse gets worse when their parents discover that they have reported it. I do

think it is a big issue now, but currently it is hard to get the true data as to how much the pandemic has really affected child abuse rates.

Networking as a Solution to Child Abuse

JS: You mentioned that a solution to mitigating child abuse in Japan would be networking among the victims or among their parents. Could this really be a solution to the issue?

Puzzar: When we were creating Guardian, of course we wanted to allow the students to feel safe in whatever they were reporting. They are aware that their full answers are only shown to those we designate as nurse administrators, who are usually the school nurse and the vice principal. When it comes to their home-room teachers, these teachers are specifically not shown any questions and answers that relate to teachers, so the children can have a safer reporting environment there. We don't aim to change the system in how schools deal with any detected issues; we just want to provide a service that allows schools to discover these issues early on. When schools move forward with these issues, potentially sharing with child consultation centers etc., there is evidence of these issues in their questionnaire answers. Hopefully with Guardian, it can be used to then encourage the conversations and the cohesion between the schools and consultation centers. They can use Guardian as a resource to ensure that these issues are noticed by everyone, rather than one person seeing something and thinking "that's OK", and taking no further action. I rather see cohesion as being the way forward, and that is why I believe that Guardian has the real potential to provide that if it is used by the right-minded people.

JS: The most important thing then is to let as many people as possible know the fact of child abuse. The second thing must be to build up a consultation network. Unfortunately, in Japan, as the history of child abuse is short, we don't have enough facilities to take care of this issue.

Puzzar: That is true. In testing Guardian, I was collaborating with the Kumamoto Board of Education. I asked them how many of these consultation centers are in Kumamoto City, and they said "one". I was shocked by that; I thought Kumamoto is fairly large and given the number of students who potentially need to go to these consultation centers, only one is not adequate! We are really lucky that the superintendent of education, Hiromichi Endo, is very forward-thinking in many of the things that he does and I heard that he has proposed adding more child consultation centers to Kumamoto City. Of course, that is not the case for every city and town in Japan – there is not enough government funding to do that, and it all comes down to the balance of education and money. It's quite a hard balance to strike without the support of government

funding on issues like child abuse.

View of Japanese NGOs

JS: I think you are right in pointing out that public facilities and the government should be taking the lead on these issues. However, maybe not only the governments but also NGOs must be involved. What do you think in general about Japanese NGOs?

Puzzar: Before I began working on the Guardian App, I did not know of any Japanese NGOs. Because there were no advertisements that I saw, there was not a lot of exposure to them, so it was only when I started researching what was available for people in Japan that I noticed them. Even so, I do feel that it is very difficult to be aware of them, just because if you have no interest you won't actually research it yourself. When I compare this to Britain, so many NGOs have television commercials that are funded by donations, so they can raise their awareness and show what they do for society to a larger demographic.

I think that Japan is so tight-knit in its communities that if someone truly believes in an NGO's purpose and there is more exposure about it, Japanese people would of course support the cause. I have never seen anywhere quite like Japan; for example if there is a problem such as a natural disaster, they help everyone almost immediately. I believe that if Japanese people knew more about what these NGOs did, and what NGOs are out there, they would assist those NGOs and support their causes. It is just the fact that NGOs don't get much government assistance and it is difficult to raise money by crowdfunding and other measures, which is such a shame as I feel that Japan is a society where NGOs would thrive if they were given the exposure that they deserve.

Experience as Advisor to the Kumamoto Government

JS: In the case of child abuse this must be true. As you mentioned, since the great disaster in 2011, Japanese NGOs have been working hard to save the afflicted people and cooperate with the public sector in doing so. I think this cooperation has been working well so far and might be the starting point for Japanese NGOs to play a bigger role in society. Could you please let us know what you are working on with the Kumamoto government? As an advisor, how do you assess the local government's contribution to mitigating child abuse?

Puzzar: Recently, we have tested Guardian with the support of Kumamoto City's board of education at three schools where I work. There were approximately 1,000 students who were able to test it.

We are currently undergoing a lot of changes to the system, with a second round of testing beginning in January 2021. We want to approach the prefecture soon, but are doing so respectfully. We would of course like to return the favor to Kumamoto – I am extremely grateful that Kumamoto City has allowed me to test this application; the feedback we have received has been invaluable in creating a better application for users and students. So we would of course like to focus on a collaboration with Kumamoto Prefecture before moving onto other prefectures. Governor Ikuo Kabashima is such a pioneer in so many ways; with the pandemic he was not afraid to create a state of emergency for Kumamoto even though the government didn't, which I believe he did to protect Kumamoto and its citizens. I believe that he has a drive to protect his fellow citizens in Kumamoto, with their best interests at heart. Especially after the Kumamoto earthquakes, he implemented so many services to assist people in areas like Mashiki and Aso who really needed assistance. I would like to make contact with him first to tell him how this prefecture has given me so much, and through working here for almost six years I have tried to give back by educating students, but I want to give back in a more impactful way. I hope that he can see that my intentions are purely to help people and children in particular. I think he would support that because he already seems like he really does truly care about people in Kumamoto.

JS: The local governments in Japan are not so internationalized. Do you think that Kumamoto Prefecture is an exception?

Puzzar: I don't have so much experience outside of Kumamoto, but I think that out of the less populated, more rural prefectures, Kumamoto is the most pioneering in many aspects. For example, did you hear about the "baby box", a system created to reduce unwanted pregnancies resulting in death or children left in unsafe conditions at Jikei hospital? This is an example of something very pioneering here and now other prefectures are taking note.

In my experience, Kumamoto seems to like to further employ foreigners who have worked in the prefecture for a long time, in the hope that we will promote Kumamoto to the outside world. When they are giving us a job and a home here, alongside being open to our advice and suggestions, they hope that we can return the favor to them by raising the popularity of Kumamoto and increasing tourism rates.

I think it is a mutually beneficial relationship. They know that foreigners can bring certain things to Kumamoto – I can push the issue of child abuse maybe more than a Japanese person could, because I can say things that a Japanese person cannot and vice versa. They can give back to me by allowing me to do things in the prefecture and test Guardian in schools like I have been doing. We have tested our initiative in Kumamoto City, and after testing in the city we have received feedback from the students, which has been very positive. A lot of them said how they enjoy the privacy of our

App because they can answer safely, privately, and they can answer when it is convenient for them and when they feel secure. Through the feedback and the changes we have made to the App, I hope that we can bring it to the Kumamoto prefectural government and show them what we have achieved with the support of Kumamoto City, showing what we can provide to the prefecture with our App.

This would also be mutually beneficial – if they adopt it, Kumamoto will look like such a pioneering prefecture in preventing child abuse, and this would also help Guardian because I want it to reach as many students as I can to help them. I am really hoping that when we do move onto that next step, we hopefully gain some support from the governor, and we can make this expansion dream of mine a reality.

JS: Is there anything else you would like to add to my last question?

Puzzar: Of course, Guardian itself is an application that can detect issues, but Guardian alone will not affect the issue of child abuse. Although we are helping with the detection, we actually need to tackle the main causes, or at least educate people about what contributes towards child abuse. I am really hoping that in the future, Guardian can collaborate with other NGOs to combine our services and educate people on child abuse – we can provide the software to detect it.

The same goes for using people with specialized skills. We have multiple school nurses who are retired now, and we could ask them for advice and ask them to assist us and harness their skills. Above all, we want to create a system that is accessible to everyone. I don't want to make this an App that can only be used by certain people because they've paid money for it. I want this App to be as widespread as possible in order to help many children, but also to educate people that this is a problem we need to discuss, and we can only educate people if we are all open to discussions that are very difficult, but need to happen.

I would love to see collaboration with NGOs to not just help raise awareness of Guardian, but to help raise awareness for them too. We want to support each other because at the end of the day we all have the same goal in mind, which is helping children, and if we can't collaborate on that then I feel like we are on a mission to nothing. We really do need to collaborate and use all our skills, products and services, like Guardian, in order to do that, firstly in Kumamoto and then nationwide – that would be an unbelievable achievement. **JS**

Written with the cooperation of Joel Challender who is a translator, interpreter, researcher and writer specializing in Japanese disaster preparedness.