

A performance by the Golden Girls given by the Republic of Bulgaria rhythmic gymnastics team at the pre-Games training camp in Murayama City, Yamagata Prefecture (July 15, 2019)



Murayama City and Bulgaria—Connected by Roses

Murayama City in Yamagata Prefecture is the registered Host Town for the Bulgarian rhythmic gymnastics team as part of the Host Town Initiative, in which people in Japan interact with people from countries and regions participating in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Ahead of other local governments, in June 2017, Murayama started its activities as a Host Town including hosting pre-Games camps of the rhythmic gymnastics team.

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At the February 2019 “Host Town Summit 2019,” a gathering for Host Towns from all over Japan, Murayama City received first-place awards in all three award categories (“Best Host Town Leader,” “Best Communicator Award,” and “Poster Session Award”). The city, located in central Yamagata Prefecture, has a population of about 23,000 (as of May 2021).

Murayama City is supporting the rhythmic gymnastics Olympic team from the Republic of Bulgaria (hereinafter

Bulgaria). The city has the rose as its official flower and is home to the Higashizawa Rose Park, a prominent rose garden in Japan with about 20,000 rose plants, while Bulgaria’s national flower is also the rose. What’s more, Murayama City has a public junior high school with national level rhythmic gymnastics as an extracurricular activity, so the city registered as a Host Town.

In June 2017, the city hosted a Pre-Games training camp for athletic groups that would participate in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games (hereinafter Tokyo Games)—the earliest example in Japan. Called the Rose Camp, the camp has been hosted three times so far, in June 2017, June 2018 and July 2019. Local volunteers eagerly offered their support. The athletes were particularly moved by the careful cleaning that left the practice area spotless, and the athletes returned the favor by writing “thank you” in Bulgarian and drawing hearts on the chalk



A Bulgarian Marteniza good luck charm created in Murayama City



A photo book of the Golden Girls, the Bulgarian national rhythmic gymnastics team

board after practice. From the deepening of these interactions, the Golden Girls Fan Club, a local support group named after the Bulgarian Golden Girls rhythmic gymnastics team, was formed by six women as core members who volunteered at the first Rose Camp. These women were also charged with planning and managing interactions during the

Camp. Their home-like warm welcome delighted the athletes and made them feel like they were “back in their home towns.” Activities included gathering around a table to make *temaki-zushi* (sushi made with choose-your-own ingredients hand rolled in seaweed). Komuro Keiko, one of the central members of the Fan Club, smiles and says, “Even though the athletes are more like grandchildren than daughters age-wise, they are like family and are truly treasured.”

There are a total of six host towns in Japan for Bulgaria for various events at the Games. Murayama City proposed that the six towns cooperate and create Marteniza, traditional Bulgarian good luck charms, by incorporating distinctive features of each host town. Murayama City’s Marteniza features a drawing of the rose spirit Mulala, the city’s mascot, performing rhythmic gymnastics. As there is a custom of gifting these good luck charms to family and friends, the city presented these Marteniza to Bulgarians as an item to strengthen bonds and expand the range of interaction. Togashi Keita, who works in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Exchange Section at the Murayama City Office, says, “The whole community working together on something is a characteristic of Murayama City.”

He also says that “Murayama City’s enthusiasm hasn’t cooled off, even though the Tokyo Games were postponed by a year due to the global spread of COVID-19.” The Golden Girls Fan Club, which currently has over 400 members, continues to present information in its bi-monthly bulletin about Bulgaria and reporting the results by Bulgarian teams at international competitions. In addition, because they have been concerned that the Golden Girls may be finding it difficult to train because of the effects of COVID-19, the Club has sent them video letters with residents saying things like, “We love you,” and, “You can do it.”

To maintain these bonds set up between Bulgaria and local residents, the Yamagata Prefecture Murayama Branch of the Japan-Bulgaria Society was established in October 2020. In April 2021, the Bulgaria Exhibition Room in the Rose Exchange Hall within Higashizawa Rose Park was reopened



The Bulgaria Exhibition Room in the Rose Exchange Hall at Higashizawa Rose Park

after renovations to be a legacy of the Tokyo Games. A total of forty-three portraits of Golden Girls athletes, volunteers from Murayama City involved in exchange, and others decorate the Exhibition Room, and were created in cooperation with the Emotenashi (hospitality through pictures) project, which creates exchange between people both in Japan and abroad through portraits.

Now in the early summer, roses of many different colors are blooming in the Higashizawa Rose Park, as if decorating it for the hosting of the Tokyo Olympics. 7