

A career as a costumed mouse? Not just for Disney World anymore

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.09.16
1020L



Choko Ohira (right), who runs the Mascot Actors' School, helps Yuko Mura with her chipmunk costume. Mura, who is 19, started at the school in January this year and hopes to become a professional. Photo: Washington Post photo by Anna Fifield

TAMA, Japan — Two years ago, Michiyuki Arano was between jobs as a chef. He decided to take a class at the Choko Group Mascot Actors' School near Tokyo, Japan.

Arano paid \$60 for the trial lesson, during which he put on a pig suit and goofed around. He was hooked.

"I really loved it," said Arano, who is 35 years old. "Once you have a different layer on, you become somebody else, not your normal self. You become a pig or a squirrel, and you see people react to you, and that makes you want to help them even more."

Teaching The Trade

Now Arano is a regular at the Mascot Actors' School, where Choko Ohira — who has been in the mascot business for almost 40 years — teaches her craft.

According to Ohira, people come to the mascot school for many different reasons. "Some people come to become professional, some come in for fun, for the stress relief," she said.

During her time as a professional mascot, Ohira played a character called Porori, a popular television mouse pirate, for 10 years. Then she opened the school, where she is "raising the next generation of mascots," she said.

Ohira teaches people how to move so that the character looks alive. She drills into her students that they must never show any skin, so that they don't give away the secret that there is a person inside the costume.

Mascots Are Everywhere

In Japan, it's hard to go anywhere without encountering a mascot. These cute and fluffy creatures are designed to make people feel happy in some of the most unlikely situations.

Waka-P, for example, is the mascot of a prison in the city of Wakayama. He has a huge, citrus-fruit head and wears a letter P, for prison. Waka-P gives out hugs and reminds people to aim for a society with no crime.

Toilet-kun can be found in the city of Yokohama, especially on November 10, which is celebrated as Restroom Day in Japan. Toilet-kun, who has a toilet-seat lid for a face and a toilet bowl for a belly, represents the city's waste recycling department.

Even Japan's Defense Ministry, a government agency that handles military affairs, has mascots. They are Prince Pickles, who comes from the imaginary country Paprika, and his girlfriend Princess Parsley, from the country of Broccoli.

No self-respecting town, business or ministry in Japan would be without a mascot. The United States Embassy in Tokyo has one: an Alaskan jellybean called Tom who is a freshman in college. Tom is orange-flavored, but he turns lemon when he's nervous. Tom promotes American culture and U.S.-Japan relations, and is often spotted with Kumamon, the black and white bear who is currently the king of Japanese mascots.

Thousands of yuru-kyara, or "laid-back characters," as they are called, attend the Yuru- kyara Grand Prix each year. Each one wants to be crowned the most popular mascot in Japan.

Unnecessary Character Costs?

Having so many mascots may be costing the Japanese government too much money. Last year the Finance Ministry launched a campaign to cut the number of mascots and decrease spending.

Researcher Masafumi Hagiwara estimates that there are about 4,000 local government-related mascots in Japan. He says that there are probably 6,000 more mascots at central government agencies, companies and other organizations.

There is so much demand, in fact, that being a mascot has become a realistic career choice, and a person can earn about \$100 a day as a character.

Put On A Turtle Costume To Get Out Of Your Shell

Fifty-one-year-old Shinji Kumamoto has been making a living in a furry costume for the past eight years. "I really enjoy being something else or someone else," he said. "I really enjoy doing things like jumping up and down in the street. Things you can't do in regular life. I can come out of my shell."

This is a pretty common feeling among mascots in Japan. "I enjoy doing something that I can't do normally," says 19-year-old Yuko Mura, who works part-time in a fast-food restaurant and started taking mascot lessons in January. "Of course, if you're out on the street no one comes up and starts talking to you, but when you're a character, people, even adults, want to talk and high-five you," she says.

Some people enjoy being mascots because it offers some escape from ordinary life, said Akihiko Inuyama, a mascot character consultant and author. And people react to mascots as they would to a pet, he said.

"They're like pets because even though you can't communicate perfectly, they still accept your love," Inuyama said. "Mascots shake hands with you and hug you. Their existence can make you feel accepted in society."