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COURTESY OF PUNA KAMALII FLOWERS

Tokyo's Haruka Sekino, center, who has Down syndrome, learns to operate a paper-shredding machine at the Big Island company Puna Kamalii Flowers, which employs mentally handicapped people. Employee Zeb Nelson flashes a victory sign in the foreground while Haruka's mother, Nobuko, looks on in the background.

Handicapped Japanese are finding hope in Hilo

**A family hopes to show Japan
examples of programs for
the mentally challenged**

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HILO » Haruka Sekino of Japan has operated a newspaper-shredding machine at Puna Kamalii Flowers for a total of about three hours during the past two weeks.

That's a lot for the 20-year-old woman with Down syndrome whose parents were told that she would never be able to work.

To be sure, Haruka was assisted by Zeb Nelson, 27, an employee of Puna Kamalii and the son of owners Tom and Vicki Nelson. But Zeb is himself mentally challenged, developmentally disabled since birth, unable to hear or use language.

His parents were also told he would never be able to work, but he has been working at the family company 40 hours per week for several years.

Having seen for themselves the progress that mentally challenged people can make in America, Haruka's parents, Kazuhiko and Nobuko Sekino of Tokyo, are planning to bring tours of Japanese officials, service providers and families with mentally disabled individuals to Honolulu and the Big Island starting next year to show them what can be accomplished.

The Sekinos outlined their plans and asked for assistance last week in a meeting in Hilo with state, county and business leaders.

The eventual goal is seven programs bringing at least 140 participants to the Big Island per year, Kazuhiko Sekino said.

Sekino, 55, retired from the insurance industry, got the idea of tours for the mentally disabled and their families two years ago while he was on a cultural exchange program in Southeast Asia sponsored by the Japanese government. Among the participants were a blind person, a deaf person and one in a wheelchair, he said.

The Japanese government has programs for the physically handicapped but not the mentally handicapped, he said.

In fact, services for the mentally disabled are declining in Japan, as budget cuts have been made, he said.

Nobuko Sekino said the government now pays for a maximum of 12 hours per month. In contrast, Vicki Nelson said she knows some mentally disabled people getting 55 hours per week of service from special assistants on the Big Island.

The service in Japan is also impersonal, Nobuko Sekino said. In Hawaii, service providers pay more attention to the individual interests of the people they are helping, she said.

These are the differences that the Sekinos want people back home in Japan to know about.

While the tours will be educational, they are also intended to give parents a break from the constant strain of giving care to a disabled family member.

"The parents are exhausted," Kazuhiko Sekino said. "We want to help them have a relaxed time."

While specific plans are in the very early stage, programs for young, mentally challenged people coordinated through the University of Hawaii at Hilo show that such tours can succeed.

Judith Fox-Goldstein, director of the Conference Center at the university, said at the meeting with the Sekinos last week that she had just finished providing a five-day program for 60 mentally challenged youths from the mainland. Only as the tour was leaving did she learn that half of the program leaders were mentally challenged graduates of the program, she said.

