



## JETMIP

There was a nauseous feeling creeping through me as I left my mother behind in the airport and headed towards the plane. It was not my first plane ride alone, or out of the state; far from it actually, as I had ridden my first four flights alone and my next four traveling to and from London, England. Over the years I had come to the realization that I was not much of an extrovert, a shy and quiet person until I felt completely comfortable with the people around me, after which they all decided I was too loud. My biggest fear for the trip was that I would not be able to make those friends. When I got the news that I had been accepted for the Japanese Exchange Teaching Memorial Invitational Program for High School Students (JETMIP) my stomach did backflips from awe and disbelief. As I headed for the plane to take me to San Francisco, and soon after Japan, I was still lingering in that disbelief. It was hard to believe that I was flying away from home for two weeks, to the other side of the country, the other side of the world. Throughout the trip I had many amazing adventures, but there was always a recurring issue that troubled me, followed me.

When I got to San Francisco I was feeling most insecure about my ability to make friends with the other thirty-one students, not because I didn't like them, not because I didn't think they were wonderful and amazing people – which I found out very quickly that they all are – it was just my own anxieties acting up. It was a worry that my Japanese would be very poor in relation to theirs, a worry that because I was the only one from Michigan I would be very different from the students, a worry that hid in the shadows of my mind throughout all of the activities in San Francisco. As I became closer to the other students, their kindness and delightful personalities eased my anxieties, and soon I became very close to all of them. We raced throughout San Fran, doing scavenger hunts, bonding, and laughing, all while keeping up with the vast amounts of information we had to absorb, had we not already known it, in preparation for the trip. After wearing ourselves out throughout the day we went back to the hotel and rested up in preparation for the long flight to Japan.

One of the reasons I was most excited to go on this trip was because it would allow me to truly practice my Japanese. Beginning this trip I had been in the midst of studying my third year in preparation for my test-out, so that I could start my fourth year the next school year. I knew going into this trip that I hadn't had much experience with the Japanese language, but when we started lectures and studying as a group at the Kansai Institute, where we were staying, I was forced to work around my poor knowledge of the Japanese language. The instructors, all kind, funny, and caring people, mostly spoke Japanese, due to the fact that their English wasn't perfect, and we were in Japan so obviously we were going to practice our Japanese. During the lessons, I had much difficulty keeping up with anything the instructors were saying; in fact if we didn't have printed copies of the PowerPoint with images I doubt that I would have understood a thing, partially because I hadn't taken much Japanese, partially because I didn't know informal speech patterns, and partially because they all spoke Japanese much faster than I was accustomed to in my classroom.

I found comfort in the fact that the other students, while having an easier time than I was, couldn't always keep up. One girl I had met, Debbie Daniels, became very close to me. When I was telling her how I couldn't keep up she helped me, taught me some things, and I don't think I could have made it through the trip without her. When talking I discovered our schools used the same textbooks, yet I felt a million years behind her. Many of the other students had roughly the same, or barely more, Japanese Language education that I had, yet they all seemed much more proficient than I was.

My lack of knowledge became especially apparent during my homestay, in which I came to love my Host Family very much, the Itezono Family – Mama, Papa, Risa and Keita. They were all kind to me, and caring. Mama was so sweet, and treated me like I was family. Papa was funny, and a big, loveable, goof. Risa was my host sister from the high school, and I love her so much; we have so much in common, and she's just the sweetest. Keita is so adorable and hyper. I enjoyed the time I had with them, but I found my lack of speaking ability became problematic at times, and I couldn't enjoy my time to the fullest because there were so many communication issues. I wish I had known more Japanese so that I could have had a better relationship with Papa and Keita, who had a hard time understanding my Japanese, and knew very little English. Risa and Mama knew a lot of English, so when there were problems that could always fill in that gap. But, I know that if I had known more Japanese I would have been able to form stronger relationships with my host family.

This was an amazing experience. It was truly wonderful, I feel blessed to have been able to go to Japan, and meet all the people I met, and do and see all the things that I experienced. However, I know that a stronger Japanese Language Education would have made this trip a million times better, and easier. I would have been able to more effectively communicate with people and understand what was going on around me. In most cases, when a student, or person feels that they didn't understand something they become frustrated. They give up and quit because they feel it is all their fault, that there was nothing else they could have done. But my frustrations, my feeling of being lost, and my inability to understand has fueled my fire to learn Japanese even more. I want to go back someday, and experience Japan again from a new, more knowledgeable perspective. I don't want anything to feel out of my reach because I didn't understand it. I decided when I got home I would go to my school board about it, and that I would fight for a better Japanese Language Education program at my school. I will improve my Japanese, continue to learn, and I hope that I can inspire others to learn. And most importantly I want to re-inspire those that felt lost or confused, so that they know Japanese is not out of their reach, just as it is not out of mine.