

## MARCH, 2019: BREEZE ISSUE #137

A FREE MONTHLY E-NEWSLETTER FOR FRIENDS OF JAPAN & TEACHERS OF JAPANESE



### 2018 J-LEAP REPORT BY ERI SAIMYO

*The Obama Academy of International Studies  
Pittsburgh, PA*

“Pittsburgh! Yay! ... Wait, where is that?”

This was my first reaction when I found out about the place where I would be starting the next chapter of my life.

Hello! My name is Eri Saimyo. I used to work as an English teacher at a public school in Japan. As much as I enjoyed my career as a teacher in Japan, I also had been wishing to experience more outside of Japan. Thanks to the J-LEAP, I am now in Pittsburgh and having everyday full of inspiration and discovery.

Today I would like to talk about Pittsburgh, where I live, the Obama Academy, where I work, what I do as an assistant teacher, my mission in Pittsburgh, and J-LEAP.

### My heart Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh is located in western part of Pennsylvania. It used to have a flourishing steel industry and you can still see the traces of the past in some places in the city. I remember so surprised to see how beautiful the city was with lots of nature and historical buildings when I first came here. My host mother, however, told me how different the city looked now

from fifty years ago. She told me air and water pollution used to be very serious in Pittsburgh because of the industry. But a lot of efforts have been made and now it is ranked in the second place to live after Honolulu, Hawaii on the survey “The places where Americans want to settle in the US”. It is also known as a college town. There are a lot of students from all over the world and you can find various exotic restaurants, including Japanese restaurants! If you have any chances to come closer to the East coast, please stop by Pittsburgh. I am sure you will love this beautiful city.

### Obama Academy of International Studies

Now I would like to talk about our school and Japanese class. I am working at Obama Academy of International Studies as an assistant Japanese teacher. Obama Academy is an inner-city magnet school that offers the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. We don't use textbooks in our Japanese class. Neither working at an IB school nor teaching without textbooks is something I have ever experienced, so it has been very interesting and there are a lot to learn. The ethnic majority of our school is African American (70% of their total composition). At first I felt overwhelmed by the energy students had, and I still have that kind of feeling, but I also realized there are similarities to the students I use to teach in Japan. They both like talking about boys and girls, classes are not the best part of their day, and they love music.

There are currently 107 students from 6 to 8 grade learning Japanese in our school. And what makes our Japanese class unique is that most of them didn't choose to take Japanese. The students who didn't take any languages in elementary school are automatically assigned to Japanese class. Most of them have no idea where Japan is, and of course, it is so hard for them to tell the difference between Japanese and Chinese.

Motivating them to learn Japanese is not only the first but also the most important mission for us teachers, since it was not their choice to be in our classroom. How can we make our classes interesting and motivating? As I mentioned above, we don't use textbooks in our class. The teachers create a curriculum and decide what to teach. My lead teacher, Nathan Bynum-sensei, is one of the most creative teachers I have ever met. He always inspires me with new ideas, and tries to listen to my ideas when we plan the lesson together. Working with him has helped me to develop myself as a teacher. I have been learning a lot, for example, not all the techniques I used to use in my classroom in Japan can be applied to the classroom we now teach. We need different approaches when we teach different students, especially when students have different cultural backgrounds. It is hard for me to change the way I am used to, but Bynum-sensei is helping me and I would love to do anything benefits our students. Also Bynum-sensei is one of the most popular teachers in our school. A lot of students stop by our classroom just to say “hi” to him. Students love him and I can tell he does, too. I think the biggest reason why students love him is that they know Bynum-sensei cares about them. I

think building a good relationship with students is very important because it can be directly related to classroom management. I hope I can learn how to build those good relationships with students from the way Bynum-sensei does.

### What I do as an assistant teacher

I think my job in the classroom is to give students as many positive Japanese experiences as possible. I would like to show students how different Japan is, and at the same time, how similar it can be even though it's so far away. In the classroom I am mainly in charge of beginning the class, doing aisatsu and reviewing previous lessons. I also walk around the classroom and work with the students who need help.



### My mission in Pittsburgh

My personal mission for these two years is to participate in more activities outside of the classroom. I realized a lot of people don't know we offer Japanese classes at school. Whenever I tell someone I am working as an assistant Japanese teacher at Obama, they say "I had no idea they were offering Japanese there!" I would like to increase Japanese recognition here in Pittsburgh. I want more people to know how interesting Japanese culture is and that Japan is not only about sushi and teppanyaki.

I made friends through my host mother and we are planning to do "Nagashi-somen" in the annual neighborhood summer festival. I would like to build more of those connections in Pittsburgh. Japan is far away geographically, but I want to make it much closer psychologically by building connections among people.

### What is special about J-LEAP

At last but not the least, I would like to talk about J-LEAP. I feel so lucky that I am here as a J-LEAP assistant teacher. We have a solid support base in both Japan and the U.S. We have detailed assistance from reliable team in Japan, and support from mentor teachers who care about us—like a mother in the U.S. We also have high-quality trainings to learn how to improve our teaching skills, which give us confidence in teaching. J-LEAP supports us just like a family. Every day being here through J-LEAP is so fulfilling and I can't believe 6 months

have already passed. Now I only have a year and a half left. I will try to make most of my stay here in Pittsburgh to benefit the Japanese community in Pittsburgh to further build the friendly relationship between Japan and America.

Thank you, Gracias, Merci, Danke and Arigato for reading through!

Yinz are always welcome in Pittsburgh!

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Annual Report

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