



2011 JET-MIP ESSAY

JANUARY, 2012: BREEZE ISSUE #51

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

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Japan is a wonderful nation that has much to offer the rest of the world. I was fortunate enough with the help of the JET Memorial Invitation Program to go there. During my stay I learned much about Japan's culture and society. This program will continue to take students to Japan for the next few years. It is my hope that through programs like this America and Japan will build good relationships and help one another build strong economies.

I heard warnings about how hot and humid Japan is during the summer; however, when I got there I thought it had a relatively mild climate. Although I may be a little bias, since I am from western Kentucky, where the heat index sometimes reaches 120 degrees Fahrenheit, and a typhoon had come through before I arrived. While staying at the Institute I found helpful accommodations. The cafeteria, serving three meals a day, offered authentic Japanese food or one could choose to eat something from a foreign country such as America. It is also interesting that green tea seems to be as common as water is in America. Another convenient accommodation that the institute provided was bicycles. I remember borrowing bikes on multiple occasions to ride around Osaka or to go to stores. One thing that surprised me about the bikes was that only the pedals locked, and no one seemed to chain their bikes to the rack. Even though it looks as if someone could easily steal a bike, no one seems to even consider it.

We took several culture classes at the Institute. One of these classes was on Japanese dialects in particular the Kansai or Osaka dialect. One interesting thing I learned after coming back from Japan is that this dialect sounds friendly to Japanese. However, I'm still learning Japanese and cannot tell that it sounds friendlier than other Japanese dialects. A new experience I had at the Institute was taiko drumming. This type of drumming involves not only being able to play but also being able to perform and dance. I am glad I was able to participate in this class and would like to try it again someday.

During the first school visit, we had a nice welcome from the schools administration and met the students that were to become our host siblings along with many other students. We were also shown a martial arts performance. At the school I had a class in calligraphy. After practicing and receiving help from students and the teacher I decorated a fan with kanji characters. I noticed at this school that the soccer field had no grass on it. This surprised me since I am used to seeing grass on soccer fields. However, without grass there is no maintenance with a lawn mower, and the ball is likely to roll faster without the friction from grass.

After the school day, we went with our host sibling to Osaka Castle. There is a beautiful garden outside the castle, and fascinating holographic historical event displays on the inside. Also unlike in America there were two stair cases next to each other. One was for going up; the other for going down. Perhaps this is to help people move throughout the castle. My host brother was also generous to me, he would hardly let me buy anything.

Later at my home stay I met a family that was always kind to me. I had a Japanese style lunch with them where I ate a variety of delicious Japanese foods including tempura and noodles. Also due to the style of the restaurant we removed our shoes in the entrance way and put them in shoe boxes that had wooden keys to go along with them.

During my home stay I got to know my host family better. My little-host-brother even showed me magic tricks that he knew. I played card games, video games, ate, and I went places with my host family. In America people do similar things; however, I personally spend more time outside than I did with my host family. For example, I spend time taking walks, gardening, and playing Frisbee. My host brother took me to his friend's house where I tried to play a Japanese game called shogi. Shogi is similar to a variation of chess called bug house that I play in America. After this, our group of friends went to a summer festival with good food, games, and performances. Some of the performances even included American music. One of the games that I played there involved scooping bouncy balls out of a pool of water with a paper that dissolves in water. If you collect 20 balls you receive a prize. I managed to get one ball. Before we left the festival, I got to see some spectacular fireworks that I do not have the chance to see at my home, mainly because they were a different style. After this festival, when I returned to my host's home, we ate sashimi. My favorite part was the eel. The morning before I went back to the Institute, I rode bikes with my host brother to the mall. We ate at a good noodle restaurant, and I got advice from him on shopping for manga. One interesting thing is that manga in Japan are much cheaper than in Kentucky.

When we arrived in Iwate for the second school visit we went to a cooking class where we were shown how to make a local sesame seed dumpling. In my opinion the dumplings tasted good and would be worth trying to make again. The biggest problem for me is it is difficult for me to get rice powder in western Kentucky even though rice is a major agriculture crop in nearby states.

At the other school I visited in Iwate, we had a very warm welcome that included an assembly of students and teachers in the auditorium. Here we gave our earthquake condolence cards away and did a small performance for the students. I was actually able to see some of the earthquake's damage, because a sidewalk had shifted levels. After the assembly we went on a tour of the school. I saw the sport kendo for the first time. I thought that it would be fun. After the tour, I had another calligraphy class. Here we were given a demonstration of calligraphy and an explanation of different styles. Afterwards, we got to try to make our own calligraphy and exchanged it with Japanese students. Although I must admit, what they gave me looked far better than what I gave them. Before we left the school, we visited a karate dojo and saw a small demonstration. I also met a student who practices the same style of karate as I do in the United States. When we left the school to go back to the institute, we had a little time to look around the airport. Here I found a lot of things relating to the poet, Kenji Miyazawa. This is because the airport is located in Hanamaki, his home town. For me this was especially exciting, because I recited his poem "Ame ni mo makezu" for a Japanese festival in Kentucky.

Also while we were in Japan, we visited Kyoto, and saw two temples. The first temple was extremely large and was on the side of a mountain. It had an impressive garden and I got to see giant *Cryptomeria japonica*. I also went on a walk with one of my friends and we found a large cemetery that was made of concrete. This would be an unusual design in the United States. When we were returning to the bus

stopped in a few shops. In one we bought matcha ice cream. This is a delicious flavor, but unfortunately it is practically nonexistent in my home town. Perhaps in the future I will be able to make this ice cream since I raise tea plants at my home. The second temple we visited is the famous Kinkakuji. This temple has a beautiful garden path for tourists. One interesting fact about this garden is that it has been in the same place for hundreds of years.

Before we left Japan, we had a final banquet and were able to say a farewell to our host families. Here we performed two American songs, and even taught the Japanese students some common dances in America. We also, received a certificate for completing the program, and watched individual performances done by American students.

The purpose of this trip was to strengthen the ties between America and Japan. Another benefit it had was showing the world that Japan is not completely destroyed from the earthquake. I had a friend warn me about going to Japan before I left, and a friend telling me that I was brave after coming back from Japan. However, since I went to Japan and came back alive I believe it will help to show the world that Japan is still a place to visit without the need to worry too much about one's own safety. I made many friends which included Japanese, Americans, and even some people that I met from other countries. The one thing that all these people had in common was an interest in Japan. It is said that the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow. Hopefully, Japan and America will continue to have good relations with one another. It is my wish that we the youth of today, will help to lead the world, in particular America and Japan, into a more harmonious relationship.

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Annual Report

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