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



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JET MEMORIAL INVITATION PROGRAM 2012 THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS

As I write this essay at my desk, gathering my thoughts on my participation in the JET Memorial Invitation Program, I realize how fresh my memories have remained in my mind even weeks after the program's closing. It's one thing to come home with countless stories to tell, but it's another to be able to look back on your hundreds of pictures and remember your conversations and emotions with lasting clarity. This trip to Japan was for me, like it was for many others, a dream trip and a blessing. But the blessings came in more ways than I could have ever imagined they would. Filling out the application back in April, I never knew that I would be entering a country so rich with culture and fighting spirit. I never realized I would meet people so wise who would teach me more about strength and building relationships than I knew I could learn. And while I could never do complete

justice to my trip in one short essay, I can do my best to offer my reader a glimpse at how thankful I am for this amazing experience.

To put it simply, my time in Japan was, in its entirety, awesome. There was never a moment when I wasn't fully enjoying my time learning and exploring, basking in the language, culture, and stories of others. The first portion of the program began with the trip to Tohoku, the region most heavily affected by the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. While I expected to see debris and reconstruction in some areas, what I got from the people of the region went beyond my expectations. From the moment we boarded the plane to Hanamaki, we were graciously welcomed by flight attendants, then children, chefs, hotel managers, city officials, and every other person who greeted us on the streets. With heart-warming kindness, Japanese people accepted us into their home country, smiling genuinely bright smiles and melting away our sympathies into an optimism that matched theirs. That optimism, that hopefulness for the future I saw apparent in the hearts of the Tohoku people, to this day still moves me and leaves me hoping that I, will someday possess even a fraction of that same fighting strength.

Of all my memories of the Tohoku trip, the one that stands out most poignantly in my mind is that of the study tour through Rikuzentakata. Never before had I seen a bus that had been so bustling with songs turn so respectfully quiet in a short instant. Over the hum of the engine you heard our tour guide, Mr. Kon'no, narrate with amazing clarity his experiences the afternoon of March 11th, and as you travel through a city like Rikuzentakata while listening to the words of a wise man who has seen more than you could possibly imagine at your current time in life, something in your entire being humbles. A disaster that had seemed so distant and global on television becomes real to your senses, and everything about it is personal. I will never forget that feeling. I know my experiences through Tohoku will leave me with the knowledge of how important it is to talk to those who have lived through major events such as the Great East Japan Earthquake, so that I may be enlightened by what they know.

Of course, throughout the deep cultural study, there was plenty of time for light-hearted fun. Shopping in Sendai, fireworks during homestay and karaoke at the Kansai Institute are only the tip of the mountain of activities in which I participated. I cannot even begin to explain the many pieces of delicious takoyaki I ate, the many cute pictures I took with my host sister from Semboku High School in Osaka, or the many times I rode bikes with my fellow JET-MIPPERS to the local malls in Rinku Town. To try and illustrate the detail of every experience would keep me at my laptop for months as the nostalgia overwhelms me at every other word.

But that is just the beauty of the opportunity a program like JET-MIP provides. There is so much to experience, so much learn whether chances are presented by the program or whether you find those chances on your own. Every moment is memorable, deserving of its own novella, and in the end, everything culminates into a rejuvenated passion for Japan and its culture, language, and people. From what used to be few reasons, I now have an endless list of reasons as to why I study Japanese. From the friends I still contact to the future trips I plan to take, my connections to Japan span widely, and to forever stay the ambassador that JET-MIP has enabled me to become, I continue Japanese.

Now back in the states, I try to explain the same story I tried to tell above to friends and family. Sometimes my stories become overwrought with sentimental nostalgia or inside jokes that no one understands, but I'm hoping my point still goes across. By my point, I don't necessarily mean convincing everyone to fly to Japan and tour the Tohoku region as I did. (Although convincing my underclassmen to apply to the program is a plus!) I hope those who hear me will get an idea of how wonderful and enlightening a trip abroad is. But I don't mean just a plain vacation across the sea; I mean a trip where you meet people, befriend people of another culture, and make lasting connections with those who will open your mind and broaden your world. You see, even though I sit here typing at my small, messy desk in suburban Philadelphia, my experiences bind my heart to those across the country and across the globe. I am so eternally grateful to the Japan Foundation and the opportunity they awarded me. Thank you so much to everyone who helped make my journey everything that it was and more.

And to the wonderful Ms. Anderson and Mr. Dickson, from all the amazing things I have heard about both of you, I wish that I could have known you. I'm sure we could have had long conversations about your favorite Japanese foods, about funny instances with your students, about your experiences as JET-ALTs and the little things about Japan that made you love the country even more than you already did. I would have loved to hear everything, and while I am unfortunately unable to do so, I was able to experience the wonder for myself. I hope the 32 of us have made you two proud, as this program held in your honor has undoubtedly made us fall in love with Japan as well. Rest in peace, and for both of your services as the epitomes of Japan-America kakehashi, thank you.

NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION



"CREPE-LOVERS' HEAVEN"

A colorful and drool-worthy selection of crepes from the food court of Seacle Mall in Rinku Town.

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