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



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The JET-MIP experience was one of the most life-changing opportunities I could ever come across. It sounds very cliché, to be part of a program where you learn about another culture that is not your own and get so immersed into your learning enough to say the experience was “life-changing,” but there are honestly no other words to describe what I experienced for two weeks in July of 2012.

At the start of the program, I did not know what to expect. I had a fixed image in my head that all of the kids in the program were good at Japanese and more confident in their language speaking than I was. At that time, asking simple sentences to my sensei in Japanese made me nervous and my heart would beat twice as fast because I was afraid of making mistakes. If saying a simple sentence would make my heart beat out of nervousness, imagine what I would feel when giving a self-introduction in

Japanese. I was afraid that I was not up to par with the rest of my fellow JET-MIP participants. It was until the moment that my first roommate, Anna, and I had a chat in our Los Angeles hotel room after a long first day of orientation. She had been studying Japanese for four years, and I had only been studying for three. She gave me some advice about being persistent in learning the language. I remember her telling me that other people might know more than I do, and that’s a good thing because they have something to offer to someone who doesn’t have that knowledge. I took this advice to heart and opened up to her. After two days of orientation in Los Angeles and eventually opening up to almost everybody, I realized that everybody was somehow just like me. They had interests in learning the Japanese language, wished to get a deeper understanding of the culture and improve with their speaking skills. I no longer had to be intimidated by everybody else; I was with the right group of people. I was excited to get to go to Japan and experience the world as foreigners with this group.

The program was jam-packed with things for us to do. There was never a dull moment with the group. We were given daily schedules, and it gave me great satisfaction at the end of the day to check off the activities listed on the sheet of paper. These activities entailed taking Japanese class (with entire instruction in Japanese!), discovering places by ourselves, trying new foods, and meeting new people. With the activities, we were always doing something productive. The activities challenged our Japanese skills and immersed us into Japanese culture. Staying at the Kansai Institute alone allowed us to engage our language skills because everybody was speaking Japanese. All of the foreigners we met in the cafeteria and in the elevator spoke Japanese; it was an instant reflex, and they were not even stuttering to transition out of their mother tongue. We were always on our toes with Japanese, which was exciting.

One major event we experienced as a group was going to the Tohoku region and interacting with the people who have been affected by the Great East Earthquake. We stayed a total of five days in the Tohoku area; two days in Rikuzentakata, one day in Kesen'numa, one day in Sendai and the last day in Ishinomaki. Our stay in Rikuzentakata and Ishinomaki was significant because Monty Dickson and Taylor Anderson left their legacies as teachers in those towns. At first, we were a little disappointed that we wouldn't be able to visit other cities such as Kyoto or Nara because our stay in the Tohoku area was extended. In the end, the longer stay was well worth our time.

Our stay in Rikuzentakata was the most eye-opening experience of the disaster. The surrounding land looked like it was part of the countryside; it was empty and the only signs of life were the plants growing from the cracks of the concrete. It was not until after our tour guide, Kon'no Fumiko, explained to us that Rikuzentakata used to be a large urban center. Seeing the remains of the foundations of buildings, debris and rubble, and finding out there were much more to the city that was swept away, it was heartbreaking. A few of us shed tears at the thoughts of how much was lost and felt the pain of those who lost almost everything they had. However, the people of Rikuzentakata were proud and strong. Amidst the ruin, banners saying encouraging things like "Ganbarou!" and "Smile! Tohoku" were waving in the wind. These banners were symbols of hope, reminding people that they still had something left. There was no reason to be sad or worried because there was always something to look forward to in the future. After wiping our eyes and putting away the tissues, I felt like we changed as a group. We no longer saw the disaster as a devastating news story on television. The real thing was right in front of us, and it was way more impacting than something broadcast on a screen. Listening to the legacy of Monty Dickson and speaking to the people of Rikuzentakata opened our eyes to the bigger picture of the disaster and its aftermath. We saw the hope and determination burning within the people of Rikuzentakata and their wishes to bring the town to normalcy and became inspired by it. Monty Dickson's story taught us that we have to keep doing what we love to do and use our energies towards a cause we truly care about. His life did not end on a low note. He taught valuable things to us that we will carry with us throughout our lifetime in order to have a more positive outlook in life. To Monty Dickson's family members, thank you very much for being a part of his life, and now, a part of our lives. We will keep his morals in our hearts and minds and obtain a positive outlook in learning the Japanese language and in life in general.

Taylor Anderson's story also brought hopeful feelings to our minds. Hearing stories of how she was such a cheerful person all the time made us think about the unnecessary, petty problems we complain about in daily life. Are such problems in need of complaint? If Taylor can pull through her challenges with a smile, then we can handle small problems in a cheerful manner. She impacted the people of Ishinomaki by teaching English to the Kiwi Club. I spoke to one of the members of the Kiwi Club, and she said that learning under Taylor's instruction was one of the best learning experiences she has ever been through. With each new English phrase she learned, the room filled with all smiles and encouragement to learn more. She could feel the energy and passion Taylor had for teaching, and that every time she spoke English, she felt Taylor smiling down on her, cheering her on with her newfound English speaking sk

Having dinner with the Kiwi club was one of the most fun parts of the trip because we got to exercise our English and Japanese speaking skills, and share stories with people we came to know and now keep in touch with. I believe events like this were a part of Taylor's dream of bringing people together by communication. Like Monty Dickson, she loved learning the Japanese language and had a passion for teaching. She passed away doing what she loved to do. Having a passion for life and smiling through the hardships are two things I learned from Taylor Anderson's legacy. Thank you, Taylor Anderson's family members and friends for shaping her to be who she was. We can all learn something from her; we can take her positive outlook in life and apply it everywhere we go. Because of her, we left Ishinomaki with a smile and a few new email addresses to write to that night.

Our stays in Kesen'numa and Sendai were short, but they were just as meaningful. We were fortunate enough to stay in Hotel Boyo in Kesen'numa. The owners, Eiichi and Tomiko Kato, were happy to share their stories of the disaster with us, and we were glad to share our honest opinions and feelings with them. Eiichi and Tomiko Kato were grateful that foreigners had an interest in their small fishing town, let alone their hotel. After the disaster, they did not have much to give because they gave all they could for immediate disaster relief, but they still gave us a roof over our heads for two days. We were "honored guests" at a hotel that helped people live through the first cold and lonely nights after the disaster. It truly was an honor.

Our stay in Sendai was also filled with meeting new people and learning their stories. We toured Sendai with our small groups and two college students who volunteered their time to be with us. It was fun to see Sendai from a native's perspective. Instead of getting lost as foreigners, we were with our college guides who knew the area well and were able to show us some fun spots in town. Sendai was also affected by the earthquake and the tsunami, but it still stood as a strong urban center. This fun little trip throughout the town was a break from all of the heavy emotions experienced in Rikuzentakata and in Ishinomaki. During this small outing alone, I felt that my Japanese communication skills improved because I was able to hold a conversation with the two college students. I also felt that I became closer to my group members, Andrew, Sophie and Samantha. I also learned that not everybody in the Tohoku area is extremely devastated by what happened on March 11, 2011. They have not forgotten what happened because there are constant reminders around them, but they are also still hopeful that things will get better in the future. With effort and determination, the people of the Tohoku area can make their lives better for themselves and their future generations with a smile on their faces.

Upon returning to Osaka, we discovered that we had a little free time. A group of us took the train to Nanba City and wanted to get a feel of a city in Japan. Walking around as foreigners made us feel even more confident in our Japanese speaking skills. For instance, my friends Jennie, Samantha and I walked into Uniqlo in the Nanba train station, and we were able to ask a store clerk how much something was, using Osaka-ben! It was exciting to go around the shopping centers, as if it were a daily thing for us! As well as going to Nanba, we went to Rinku Town and the area surrounding the Kansai Institute. Going around as foreigners gave us a taste of what we might encounter in the future, since now most of us want to live and work in Japan, or do something Japanese-related with our lives. Even in free time, we were on our toes with our Japanese and loved every single second of it.

Another challenge and fun experience was participating in a homestay. My host sister, Miona, is a first year student at Senboku High School in Osaka. She is younger than most of the other participants' brothers and sisters, so my experience was a little different from theirs. She has a younger brother and two parents. I really connected with them the two days we had together. I remember meeting my host dad when my host mom pulled up her car into the driveway. The smiles on their faces grew upon the ins ran up to my host dad and hugged him. He told me I was taller than he imagined. We laughed and I

that I was going to remember them for a long time. During my homestay, I went to Hamadera Park in Takaishi City by bike with my host sister. We rode around and saw the beautiful greenery, as well as played on the playgrounds as if we were 10 year-olds. We rode home and I was surprised to smell charcoal burning on the porch. My host parents were throwing a neighborhood barbeque, just to celebrate my being there. They cooked yakisoba and grilled vegetables because I told them how much I love those foods. Even one of the neighbors pitched in; he bought one of the most expensive kinds of fish available in Osaka and grilled it just for me. I was so grateful that everybody appreciated my presence, and I was happy to be around them. I played the ukulele and sang songs for them. They didn't know the words I was singing because I sang English songs, but just to see their cheerful faces gave the impression that they were singing along too. At that moment, my host family reminded me of my family in the Philippines. They loved to have me around because I was a foreigner, and they wanted to show me how to have a good time in their country. My host family's hospitality really made me feel that I have already been a part of their family for a long time. I was glad to have known such great people and, now, I am expecting a letter back from them!

What was unique about our JET-MIP group was that we loved to sing. I brought my ukulele on the trip and played songs for everyone to sing on the bus. We even got to sing in Rikuzentakata, in front of our new friends we made at the Rikuzentakata High School Summit. The Kansai Institute also had a piano and a karaoke room, so there was never a day without music. During our free time, I would either go to the beautiful Yamaha in the lobby to tickle the ivories, or just chill with friends at midnight in the karaoke room. This meant a lot to me because I am a music major at LaGuardia Arts High School. Music is something I am surrounded by all the time, and I was glad I got to share my love of music with everybody on the trip.

Aside from becoming language-learning buddies and a chorus of singers, we JET-"mippers," as we eventually called ourselves, became the best of friends. We were not separated into our own little groups; everybody was friends with everybody. It was the kind of bond that people would normally develop if they have known each other since elementary school. It did not start out that way, though. We had to go through awkward conversations and moments of not saying things to each other. Eventually, we all got to know each other and appreciate each other for who we were. For two weeks, we lived with each other and got to know each other, and now we are trying to keep in touch using every method of communication possible. Even now, I am expecting a letter from one of my friends from Texas. Now that we are implanted in each other's lives and hearts and minds, it is hard to forget each other. There are days when I feel down and lonely because the trip is over, then I remember all the cheerful memories we made and I find myself smiling again. This group of "mippers" changed my outlook in life. I feel that I am a better person by knowing them. I am better because my Japanese speaking skills improved by practicing with them, and because this group of people and I connected to the point where removing that connection is impossible. I have made friends for life on this trip.

As JET-MIP participants, our main goal was to answer the question "How can we be a bridge between the United States and Japan?" That question, we found, could be answered in many ways. From experiencing those wonderful two weeks in Japan, we've concluded that communication is the most important aspect of establishing a relationship. There are many relationships between the US and Japan, such as certain cities in Japan have sister cities and provinces in the United States. Some of us weren't even aware of said relationships. It was enlightening to know that the United States and Japan are more connected than we are aware of, and it is our goal to make sure that relationships such as this are kept alive. The theme of communication and its importance were relayed throughout our time in Japan. This is something we will take with us when we further our Japanese language studies. I will continue learning Japanese language with a smile and an open mind, and hopefully someday, my legacy will be remembered too.

# NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION



## "SIMPLE MEMORIES"

Tourism is at its best from the back row of a 2003 Honda.

Breeze #74



Breeze #73



Breeze #72



Breeze #71



Breeze #70

Breeze #69



Breeze #68



Breeze #67



Breeze #66



Breeze #65



Breeze #64



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