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



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I have been studying Japanese for the last three years, but through the lens of classroom textbooks, I never got a complete idea of Japan. I had shreds and bits of information. I knew that samurais follow bushido, yukatas are worn at summer festivals, bowing is basic manners, and chopsticks are difficult to use. Those random pieces put together could never make a complete picture of an entire society. So, effectively, I did not know what to expect when I was offered a free trip to Japan through the JET Memorial Invitation Program. I entered Japan naïve and starry-eyed, but I left with a new concept of what a foreign country is.

The first thing I noticed in Japan was the mountains. There is a large difference between seeing a mountain range on a map and viewing it personally. Every city and village we saw was nestled in the valleys. Long lines of buildings and roads climbed up the sides of the mountains in Osaka City, making the whole city look like some glittering, vibrant spider on its web. The mountains themselves were gorgeous and awe-inspiring. They weren't dry, bare rock like the mountains in California. They were a vivid green, covered in trees and plant growth. They didn't cut a jagged silhouette; they were the picturesque "rolling mountains" right out of ukiyo-e paintings. When we were in Rikuzentakata, I felt like I was sitting at the bottom of a bowl, overshadowed by the towering peaks. The geography of Japan alone humbled me.

Imagine how much more humbling it was walking through the wreckage of Rikuzentakata and Ishinomaki. Even after a year, the clean-up still had a long way to go. It only took months for U.S. media to forget about the disaster, but it will be many more years before the recovery is over. Despite their loss, the locals were very kind and cheerful. They always greeted us with a smile and never complained of their conditions. In the U.S. and other countries, people in an area of devastation either evacuate immediately and shout loudly for help from the government. The people of the Tohoku region did neither. Many of them stayed in their homeland instead of abandoning it, and none of them begged us for help or donation.

Whenever they spoke of the disaster, they told us they were doing their best to move forward and would continue working hard to rebuild their once-beautiful town. It was amazing to see their determination and tenacity.

For me, the best memories I have of Japan aren't from famous castles or tourist attractions, but from the quiet residential areas and small towns of Japan. Those chance meetings with passersby provided the most insight on Japanese culture. I learned more from talking with a shopkeeper in Ishinomaki than I did from walking through Osaka castle. Walking through those areas alone or in small groups really made me feel integrated in the community, even if I stuck out like a sore thumb. Figuring out how to take the train and ask for directions was also a great learning experience. The Kansai Kokusai Center itself was a great community as well. There were many representatives from many different cultures and we had to use Japanese as a medium to communicate with them.

My experience in Japan will contribute greatly to my future learning of the language. While we stayed at the center in Osaka, we took a Kansaiben class, which was both fun and useful. However, speaking to average Osakans was still difficult. I managed to successfully ask a young man how to get to the subway in Nanba, but when my little host sister asked me a short question, I couldn't understand. I realized then that I didn't even know what a foreign language was. What I had been learning in my American public school felt more like a static and sterilized code, which I could memorize by rote and easily spit back out onto tests and homework. In three years, I thought I had achieved something in the Japanese language, but in front of this child I had little more than nothing. It was the most humbling experience of my life. It turned out she was asking me how the weather was in Florida. I discovered that a foreign language is not static or standard. It is much more than reading or vocabulary. It is gestures, intonation, emphasis, expression, meter, colloquialism, inflection, and more. I'll carry that knowledge with me through every Japanese class I will take.

Even though we were given such a great opportunity, it came from tragedy. Monty Dickson and Taylor Anderson died in the tsunami while they were working as JET Assistant Language Teachers. They died young and far from home, but they died doing something they loved. From teaching elementary school students and speaking with high school students, I think I see why they wanted to come here through the JET program. Many of my fellow participants also expressed a new desire to enter the JET program after college. I hope the 2012 JET-MIP participants can become an enduring legacy for Taylor Anderson and Monty Dickson.

The wealth of experience and knowledge I gained from the trip was overwhelming. Japan was truly a world unto itself. It wasn't just an exotic place or a great vacation destination, but an entire paradigm of different perspectives, traditions, manners, ethics, religion, and philosophy, built and compiled over hundreds and hundreds of years. From experiencing Japan, I learned a lot about Japanese culture as well as American culture. When we returned, we began to notice American attitudes and mannerisms that we had never noticed before. The JET Memorial Invitation Program taught me a lot about the difference between cultures and how we can bridge the gap between them.

NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION

"LOCAL SCHOOL CHILDREN"

Local children on their way to school in the morning.



Breeze #74



Breeze #73



Breeze #72



Breeze #71



Breeze #70

Breeze #69



Breeze #68



Breeze #67



Breeze #66



Breeze #65



Breeze #64



2012 JET-MIP Report 7/8

2012 J-LEAP Report: Chieko Yamada

2012 J-LEAP Report: Minako Kadoi

2012 JET-MIP Essay: Maylin Chong

2012 JET-MIP Essay: Rebecca Lee

2012 JET-MIP Essay: Ruby Cabuya

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Breeze #63



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