

## MARCH, 2013: BREEZE ISSUE #65

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



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My two-week stay in Japan this summer was, simply put, like visiting another country. Not very surprising, I know, but it's the most accurate way to describe it. Over the course of the program, the thirty-two of us had all sorts of experiences that would be hard to come by in America. We relaxed in onsen, slept on futons in tatami mat rooms, wore yukata, played taiko drums, and even (*gasp!*) parked bikes outside of stores *with absolute confidence that they would not be stolen*. We saw how, in a thousand subtle and not-so-subtle ways, Japan differed from America.

Of course, the things we did are only half the story; far more important are all of the people we met along the way. There was Kon'no Fumiaki san, who gave us a tour of his hometown of Rikuzentakata and told us how he had experienced the earthquake and tsunami; Kato Eiichi san and Kato Tomiko san, who warmly welcomed us to their hotel during our tour of

Tohoku; the Nakajô family, who did everything possible to make sure I had a fantastic home stay with them; and countless others. All of these people helped make my time in Japan truly unforgettable, and I wish I could have spent more time with all of them.

The people who had the biggest impact on my experience in Japan were my fellow JET-MIP participants. Over the course of a two-day orientation, I made thirty-one new friends, and together we had the best summer vacation ever. We ate together, went on group shopping trips, helped each other with Japanese, and had karaoke parties that lasted until 2:00 AM. We've been missing each other ever since we got home, and we're already planning to have a reunion in Japan in five years.

At the beginning of the trip to Japan, we spent about a week in the Tohoku region visiting cities that had been damaged in the earthquake and tsunami on March 11th, 2011. In Rikuzentakata and Kesenuma we saw many empty lots with grass growing in them, which we learned were once city blocks. We also saw the ruins of Rikuzentakata's city hall and a gymnasium where people had fled for shelter when the t

hit. One of the most striking images was a 330-ton ship that had been carried by the tsunami into the middle of a street in Kesenuma. However, we also saw the ongoing recovery effort during our time in Tohoku. We heard the mayor of Rikuzentakata talk about his eight-year plan for reconstruction, watched cranes working to gather up debris from the disaster, and saw many photos of people who had helped repair roads and buildings in Ishinomaki. We learned that the people affected by the tsunami were moving on with their lives. Kon'no san, our tour guide in Rikuzentakata, told us not to worry about the people of his city, because if we worried, they would worry about us. We witnessed incredible perseverance and courage, and learned lessons that we will carry with us for the rest of our lives.

It's hard to quantify how my Japanese improved during the trip. There were some new words and phrases I learned, like "Left turn ahead" (after being driven to Kyoto and back in the Nakajô's GPS-equipped car), but most of the changes were harder to consciously observe. However, the JET-MIP program will affect my future Japanese studies in much more obvious ways. For one thing, I've made many Japanese-speaking friends who I can consult when I run into problems. I've also learned about useful online resources created by the Japan Foundation. Most importantly, my resolve to someday become fluent in Japanese has been strengthened; I want to return to Japan and see everyone again.

When I got home, my family asked me all sorts of questions like "What was the most surprising thing you saw?" I found these sorts of questions rather difficult to answer; I couldn't just distil out bits and pieces of the trip on demand. Finally, I gave them a full account, day by day, over dinner at a local Japanese restaurant. It felt good to open up the floodgates and tell the entire story, and my audience enjoyed it too.

During the trip to Japan, we heard a lot about Taylor Anderson and Montgomery Dickson, in whose honor the JET Memorial Invitation Program was created. They went to Japan to help teach English to Japanese students, and lost their lives in the tsunami of March 11th. Like us, they were interested in Japan's language and culture, and they worked to help bring our nations closer together. After traveling to Japan and learning about Taylor and Monty's sacrifice, I have become inspired by their story. I want to help further the cause that they gave their lives for, as a bridge between America and Japan.

## NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION



### "NANA KOROBİ, YA OKI"

Construction workers clearing debris from a destroyed building in Rikuzentakata. "Nana korobi ya oki" is a Japanese proverb with the literal translation of "Fall down seven times, stand up eight," or the English equivalent "If at first you don't succeed try, try and try again."

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