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



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Traveling to Japan had become a distant goal and dream for me. Each opportunity for Japan that came up, always managed to get canceled for one circumstance or another. The Japanese language program at South Salem High School, due to budget cuts, began to deteriorate. My own passion for the language and the culture began to dwindle as my hopes of ever going to Japan began to be pushed to dark depths of my mind. Never in a million years did I think I would be going to Japan before I graduated with a master's degree in something. Finding out that I would be a part of the JET Memorial Invitation Program was surreal as well. People from my Japanese class were congratulating me in the halls, for what I thought was nothing—I had not been in class that day due to exams, when Sensei had announced the news—and thus found myself sitting outside feeling terrible about exams with an underclassmen breaking the news to me. From there on, sending in the documents, packing, boarding on the plane; it was all surreal! I did things with a dazed expression. I would be going to Japan! Before I even got to attend university! It wasn't until I was sitting at a table, strangers on each side, that I began to feel nervous. By simple observation, I realized that my fellow JET-MIPpers were quite skilled in the language and I truly felt I wasn't at par with them. Japan would put me to the test.

I didn't know what to expect from the program. We received presentations on experiences of the year prior but were then explained that our trip would be different. My experience in Japan was a pleasant surprise. It is very different to experience Japan in comparison to just reading about it. I had read about the friendliness of people and how polite everyone was, but it was such a culture shock to be greeted everywhere I went. Cleanliness and organization also came to me as a shock. Japan was simply amazing. The program itself was everything that I could ask for, and more. Everyone at the Institution was extremely helpful, from the people at the front desk to the adorable ladies at the dining hall. Then there were our teachers who we just couldn't help getting attached to. Needless the part of the trip that left the greatest impression on me was the Tohoku portion of the trip.

Once we began to take in the landscape in Rikuzentakata, the realization that we were very uninformed on the situation of Japan after the disaster became a very apparent subject. I myself had no idea how Japan was recovering. The very little coverage in American media all seemed to revolve around the issue at hand in Fukushima. In fact by the time I got home and started talking to people, that was the first question on everyone's mind, "weren't you worried about radiation?" The disaster of March eleventh, had effects farther than just Fukushima. Rikuzentakata, Ishinomaki, two places which had practically been laid out flat due to the intensity of the tsunami. While the initial shock of the situation filled me with a deep sadness, I was also filled with an immense admiration for the citizens of these cities. Banners raised high with words of encouragement, smiles—the people we spoke too, our new friends, none spoke with sadness of the past, but all with determination and smiles towards the future. These people were not wading in a pool of sadness (something that had I suffered the same would most likely be feeling even a year after the fact), but were in fact focused on what they could do to recuperate and improve their lives. Everyone we met received us with open arms, kindness, and gratitude. My fellow JET-MIPpers and I were all treated like being there was this amazing thing on our part to do, and we were constantly in presence of gratitude for what our country, along with many others, had done to aid them after the disaster. They treated us like close friends of Ms. Anderson and Mr. Dixon. Even now, the thought of how highly appreciative they were of what they had, of what we represented. I think, that in part, we have to thank Mr. Dixon and Ms. Anderson and the positive impact they left in many of the lives of the people in these areas. The Tohoku portion of the trip was an enlightening one. We were lucky enough to see a different side of Japanese life, and culture. Often times with school groups and such, the experience is that of a tourist— big cities, bright lights— things that are typically associated with the country of Japan. Thanks to the JET Memorial Invitation Program we were privileged enough to see a bit of two sides of Japan.

One of the most fun experiences of the program—just ask anybody— was the homestay. I like to think of my host family as my second family. When they asked me what it was that I wanted to do, or what I wanted to eat, I simply asked for whatever it was that they typically did. And that is what I experienced. My family was eager to learn about my life, and I of theirs.

On our first day together, I spent the afternoon alone with my mother while my sister was at cram school and father was running some errands. My mother spoke no English therefore putting my own language abilities to the test. I have to say those few moments where I had no one to help me fill the language barrier gaps were the most satisfying because I had the most to gain from them. My family wouldn't hesitate to correct me if I made a mistake. They were supportive and glad that I was making mistakes because it meant I was trying. My host family truly made me feel like I was part of the family. They went out of their way to make sure I had everything I needed. Festivals, fireworks, food, jokes, and conversation—undoubtedly one the most memorable of experiences.

One of the objectives of the program was to help us build networks. I have so many new friends, both from the US and Japan, all whom I am eager to see again. With definite bonding experiences as a large group and within our small group, I feel very lucky to have gotten to meet all of them.

A question that was asked frequently throughout the program was "why did you begin to take Japanese?" I never really knew the answer for myself. But in hearing the stories of Ms. Anderson's and Mr. Dixon's influence in Japan and their passion for the subject, country, and language, I realized that it was the love for Japanese culture and language. Not my passion, but that of my instructors. In middle school I had a wonderful teacher who had a tremendous impact in my life. She was not a Native Japanese speaker, but she studied in college and lived in Japan for many years. I had never met anyone with such a passion for what they taught. I took Japanese 1 because I was drawn to her. She continuously fed my passion for Japan. My interest in culture and language grew—Japanese became my "thing" and it has been eve

Yet, as I mentioned before, through discouragement and stagnation, my interest began to deteriorate. The JET Memorial Invitation Program has rekindled that desire to know and explore more on the matters of Japan. In hearing the ALT's stories and experiences, I was once again reminded of how amazing, awesome, and alluring Japanese culture and language is. Here, at home, it shows as well. My enthusiasm has translated to my little sister who has spiked an interest in the language; picking up my old textbooks and worksheets on her own trying to learn, eager to ask questions and to see pictures from the trip. Once I noticed how easily enthusiasm translates, I realized that was one of the best methods in order to become a bridge—to simply share my love for Japan. Encourage and show everyone the wonders of Japan.

To Mr. Dixon and Ms. Anderson, I'd like to say thank you. Your dedication and enthusiasm, passion for Japan has paid off in that new generations are taking your desires of a bridge between two nations and making it a reality. Your stories have moved me, and I only wish that my own life could be as fulfilling as yours was. Thank you for the encouragement and for the positive head start you have given us by your presence in Rikuzentakata and Ishinomaki.

And Thank You, The Japan Foundation, for the opportunity of a lifetime.

NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION



"YUKATA"

Cultures merging in beauty.

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Breeze #73



Breeze #72

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2012 JET-MIP Essay: Suzanne Barrientos

2012 JET-MIP Essay: Susan Zhao

2012 JET-MIP Essay: Tiana Dunn

2012 JET-MIP Essay: Yu Ri Kim

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