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



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WALKING A NEW PATH

Whenever I imagined myself going to Japan, I thought I would be a tourist. I would go to the popular tourist attractions such as Tokyo, take many pictures, and go shopping until my bags were overflowing with souvenirs. Never would I have thought that I would have the amazing

experience that I had with JET-MIP not as a tourist, but as an ambassador and a bridge between the nations.

When my teacher selected me to fill out an application for this program, I was not sure what to think. I didn't 100% know exactly what this trip was about. I knew a little about the disaster, but this trip opened my eyes to the devastation it really was. However, what really moved me about this trip was how positive the students were. As someone who has always struggled with pessimism, it was surprising to see how upbeat everyone seemed to be. If I would have just done more research online and seen the disaster areas without talking to the victims, I would have never been able to experience this wonder. When I communicated with the students, they did not seem miserable like I thought they were. I remember when one student told me that her school caught fire during the tsunami and a lot of her friends were killed; yet she still kept moving forward and proceeded to tell me about how parts of the town were rebuilt. When she discussed the disaster, she did not show a face of someone depressed or mourning. Instead, she was filled with hope. Everyone seemed to have this feeling of hope painted all over his or her face. Another thing that surprised me was the fact that we were able to bond so quickly with these students.

When I first stepped out the plane and into the airport, I knew this trip was not going to be easy. I was in a completely different world. For once, I was the foreigner. Not only did I look different than everyone else, but also I did not fully understand the language presented around me. Knowing only 125 kanji, I could not read a lot of the signs because they were in kanji. There was no way I could figure it out unless I asked someone in my group who was more advanced than I was. I thought that I would have such a hard time communicating with the students, especially because of the language barrier. However, I was proven wrong. Maybe their English wasn't that great, and maybe my Japanese was hard to understand, but something else overcame the language obstacle. That thing is a similar interest, I may not exactly like movies and music in the mainstream America genre, but at least I know what they are, and it threw

guard when the students said they loved Twilight and Glee. I didn't even think they'd know what High School Musical was, but they loved those movies. If they did not like mainstream America, they would love anime. I remember when I mentioned Black Butler and some of the girls starting freaking out like fans would in the US. At these moments, I realized that maybe we weren't as different as I thought, and these bonds will stay strong even after the visit ended because of the exchange of contact information. I highly doubt that a tourist would form this many friendships during his or her stay in Japan.

Finally, I was really moved by the fact I could walk the same path as Taylor and Monty. By doing that, I could easily see how much of impact these people have had on the people around them. It was really emotional for me especially in Ishinomaki. When we climbed all those stairs, we didn't really know the meaning behind it. All we knew was that we were hot and there were way too many tires. When we got to the top however, our thoughts changed. It may have been in exhausting trip, but it was worth it. We had a breathtaking view over Ishinomaki. It was later explained that not only was this Taylor's favorite place to go, but also this was the route people took to escape the tsunami. They climbed those very stairs and stood in the same spot we stood. It was an incredible thing to think about.

Later that day, we met with the Kiwi Club and one line in a speech brought me to tears. They said that they believed we were a gift to them from Taylor. That was when it really hit me. Even if Taylor and Monty are gone, that does not mean their legacy must end. In fact, we should walk in their footsteps like we did on this trip not just physically, but also by being a bridge between the nations and helping and inspiring those around us. This trip gave me more of an inspiration and purpose to continue my Japanese studies. If everything goes according to plan, I hope to continue studying Japanese and eventually becoming a JET.

When I shared my experiences with my friends and family, they were not only shocked by the information about the disaster, but they were also shocked by how much this trip has changed me for the better, Taylor and Monty, you both have deeply inspired me. You may not be physically here, but I can feel your presence through those you have helped and influenced. I hope to follow your example and touch as many lives as you have. You have left a permanent mark on this Earth and I will never forget what you and this trip have taught me.

NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION



“Tunnel of Friendship”

This picture shows the bond that we had with the students by forming tunnels as a sign of our friendship, but it also physically shows bonds by joining hands to support each other. This could also be taken as a physical representation of the bridge that we built between Japan and America.

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2013 J-LEAP Report: Hitomi Komeda

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