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



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By July, my friends had already gone off island to Korea or to Japan or to the states to visit their relatives and get ready for college. So the day I had to leave for Los Angeles, there was no one at the airport for me to say goodbye to but my mother. I wasn't going to get the usual "have-all-your-friends-come-to-the-airport-and-cry" fanfare that I had envisioned since senior year and had already participated in several times. I left quietly and sullenly.

This wouldn't be the first time I travelled alone, nor would it be the first time I went to Japan. I wasn't expecting too much and honestly would have preferred staying in Korea for one glorious month. But that wasn't happening and I didn't really have a choice now that I was at my gate waiting to board. At the time, I felt completely neutral. It wasn't that I was dreading the trip. I just wasn't looking forward to it as much as I should have.

Even by the time we reached Japan, I was still unfazed by what was going on around me. The best thing so far was being surrounded by new people. It had been so long since I had the chance to actually meet strangers and talk to them. Guam is really, really small and my school was one of the smallest on island, too. I literally grew up with my class since fifth grade. We rarely got new students or new teachers, so I was used to knowing every single student and faculty member in the high school. (It was getting so, so boring.) I really hoped that visiting students, meeting my host families, and making new friends on the trip would work out really well for me.

It worked out really well for me.

Let's start with the students we met. Everyone was so excited to meet us and we were always welcomed very warmly. We played games, sang, took pictures, and talked regardless of the language barrier. If we could not find the words to express ourselves, gestures and smiles went a long way. We thought we would be the ones learning about their experiences during 3.11 and learning about Japanese culture. But the students, our new friends, were also interested in us, where we came from, and the stories we had.

eagerness to learn about one another was there for both sides, and it strengthened the bonds we made. We kept in touch long after saying goodbye to each other through email or Facebook, and are still able to do so even now.

Next: my host families. Although my experiences with my Sendai and Osaka host families were vastly different, there were common factors in both: I felt welcomed, I had so much fun, and I felt like a part of the respective families. Both of my families also showered me with present, after present, after present during the least expected times. During the twenty minutes I ate cake with my host sister in Sendai before we had to go back to the hotel, my host mother and host older sister developed all the pictures we had taken and made a scrapbook for me. After walking around and sweating in a yukata all day with my host family in Osaka, they presented me with a brand new one to take home, complete with an instruction manual on how to wear one. My host families were so kind and loving toward me that even my real mother was extremely touched when I told her about my experiences. Goodbye was so difficult—so much more difficult than saying goodbye to all the students we met. But I have recently sent letters to both families and talked to my host sisters through Facebook and Line.

In the midst of building new relationships with so many people, I also learned - A lot. I learned that, contrary to what I had initially thought, there was still so much damage left in the Tohoku area. I also learned that, although I could do little to help with the physical damage, there was so much I could do to help mend people's spirits. I learned about the strength it took for people to carry on after the disaster, along with the kindness and generosity they showed one another.

This trip was so fulfilling. Along with the bonds I created with my Japanese friends and family, I bonded with the students on the trip as well as our awesome chaperones. Even before the trip, I had planned to continue studying Japanese, although I was unsure of what else I wanted to do. Now I feel as if I have options for the future, even though my only thought so far is to try to become a JET-ALT after I graduate college. Overall, my interest in Japanese and desire of having Japan in my future has only strengthened. It is very comforting to have a resolute thought in mind before travelling thousands of miles to Philadelphia for college, where I will meet even more people and do plenty of soul searching.

My family was very happy to see this change in me. My mother, especially, is a little less worried about sending me off. I'm less anxious now and more excited to pursue my goals of becoming fluent in Japanese and having it as a part of my future (Especially since I overcame my fear of actually speaking Japanese in real life - Success!). She is extremely grateful to my host families and even hopes that at least one of my host sisters could have her own home stay in Guam with us. She really wants to reciprocate the love and kindness that I received. My aunt and grandmother, who were paranoid about the "hazards and radiation" in Tohoku also learned a bit more about the area and learned about looking past the damage, searching for the people, and offering help. My friends, who I met in Korea (although I could only meet them once), were also quite surprised that I had enjoyed myself. They had expected me to stay jaded through the program and simply go through the motions instead of soaking everything in. I've generated some interest of Japan in them, and hopefully they may decide to continue Japanese as well.

And I have all of this to be thankful for because of Taylor Anderson and Monty Dickson.

Dear Taylor and Monty,

Visiting the places where the two of you frequented had an even bigger impact on me because I had learned about the two of you and the joy you gave to so many people. I definitely hope to continue legacies and will not forget Tohoku and the experiences I had. I have learned and even felt so many

things on this trip, and it has given me the confidence I really needed to go off to college and explore another world. I will always be grateful. Thank you so, so much.

The realization of how fortunate I truly was to be selected for this program fully settled in at the very end, during the wrap-up meeting in Los Angeles. The slightly awkward and nervous atmosphere between strangers from the first day of the program had dissipated. We were now a group of friends who had just completed one of the best and most fulfilling trips of our lives, ready to share our experiences and our stories with the rest of the world.

NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION



“The View From Here”

This is the view from Mt. Hiyoriyama. I took this picture after the long, difficult, painful (I am not athletic) hike up the mountain. The view and listening about Taylor Anderson, though, made it all worth it in the end.

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