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



2013 J-LEAP REPORT BY YUKO MIYATA

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Aloha everyone,

My name is Yuko Miyata and I'm currently working as a Japanese Assistant Teacher at Aina Haina Elementary School on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. Aina Haina is a residential area located on the east side of Waikiki and

Diamond Head, and is much quieter compared to busy Waikiki. There is also a very nice beach that I sometimes visit after school to relax and enjoy the beautiful ocean view.

One of the things that first impressed me when I moved here was how closely Japanese and Hawaiian cultures are connected. For example, words like "BENTO", "MUSUBI", "UDON", "FURIKAKE", "RAMEN" or "MOCHI" are seen everywhere in Hawaii and everyone knows what they are. But sometimes the food culture here is twisted. For example, there are so many Japanese restaurants in Hawaii that serve Japanese food, yet the dishes are not traditional. One example is that sometimes green onion is placed on the lid of OWAN (Japanese style soup bowl), but we actually never do that in Japan.

In terms of learning Japanese language and culture, the mixture of Hawaiian and Japanese can be useful because there is so much familiarity; it is more ingrained in daily life here compared to other parts of the country. On the other hand, students can take this for granted as well because Japanese culture is all around them and they may not try very hard to experience it. So, the combination of the two cultures can be both a positive and negative influence in teaching the Japanese language.

Aina Haina Elementary School has about 600 students from kindergarten to 5th grade. Every student takes Japanese classes once a week, ranging from a 30 minute class for younger students to a 45 minute class for older students. We also have an after school program for students who want to learn more.

Students in kindergarten to 3rd grade learn how to say numbers and colors, describe the weather, and simple expressions. Also, Japanese games such as SUGOROKU, DARUMA OTOSHI, GOMOKUNARA OTEDAMA and more are taught. This way, students learn about the culture and the language at the time while having fun. It's as if they are learning effortlessly.

Students in the upper grades learn more about the differences between Japanese and Hawaiian culture, such as Japanese etiquette and holiday customs. For the end of the year, older students wrote Nengajoo using Hiragana or Kanji. We had a Nengajoo contest as well and the winners will be chosen after the new year and prizes will be awarded. This allows the students to learn more about Japanese people and eventually find their own interests in Japan.

I'm learning many things from my lead teacher, but perhaps the most important thing I've learned from her is how important it is to maintain the students' attention by providing engaging and active lessons. In my opinion, this is true not only for the lower grades, but also for older students and adults as well. So we sing songs and play games a lot, which they really like and provides them a way to learn new vocabulary easily.

My role as an assistant teacher in the classes is to help students who are not following or understanding the instructions given by the lead teacher. I also work with small groups of students who need extra practice with pronunciation, or memorization of new words. Next semester, I'm very much looking forward to co-teaching an after school class for kindergarteners. I hope I can use the skills and techniques I'm learning from my lead teacher there. My biggest goal is to help the students have fun while they learn, and in this way develop their interests in Japanese language and culture.

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