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



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It took weeks for the reality of my trip to Japan to fully sink in. I remember getting the email announcing that I was going to be one of the lucky 32 to make the trip; I remember calling my dad and my boyfriend and posting the news on Facebook. I remember the anxiety messing with my sleep the night before we flew to LA, wondering if I'd forgotten to pack anything essential. And yet, lying in

bed in a hotel room with LAX outside of my window, twenty-four hours before I was set to fly to Tokyo, it still hadn't hit me. My head knew I was going to Japan, but the rest of me wasn't convinced it was really happening. In fact, it didn't really all come together for me until suddenly I was standing on a sidewalk in Osaka, surrounded by unfamiliar noises and road signs and trees. I was in Japan, and everything was perfect. And what's more, the perfection just kept going. Everything about the entire JET Memorial Invitation Program was perfect, allowing us to experience Japan in the best way possible for two weeks.

There are many different aspects of Japan, and we couldn't learn everything and go everywhere in the short time allowed for our visit, but the program certainly made the best of it. At first our schedule looked intimidating, but when we got to the Kansai Institute, we found that we had all the freedom we could want. We could bike or walk or bus to malls or the beach. Luckily, the scheduled events were just as good - fun or interesting or enlightening. At my school near Seattle, we get a lot of visitors from Japanese high schools, and those events have always been one of the best parts of my Japanese education. When our group in Japan visited the schools on our schedule, I realized that it's just as fun from the other end, us being visitors. Even in the disaster areas, the students were welcoming and full of delight; even if they were shy meeting so many new people at once. Finding so many things in common with them gave every one of us Americans comfort in a place so far from home. In my host families, both in Sendai and Osaka, I found two genuinely loving people who were willing to guide me through unfamiliar experiences every step of the way, and whose families took me in as one of their own. Having the opportunity to stay in a Japanese house and eat home-cooked food was incredibly important in this program, because it gave us an ideal window into the daily lives of ordinary people. I was surprised by both how different and similar those lives were - but I still felt like I was home.

The concept for the JET Memorial Invitation Program was born from the tragedy that struck Japan on March 11th, 2011, when Japan's east coast was damaged first by a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and then by tsunami waves up to 133 feet. In America, when I heard the news of what is now called 3-11 and saw the photographs, it was clear to me that what had happened was devastating. However, photos and numbers cannot capture the scale of such a huge disaster. Being in the Tohoku region and seeing the destruction firsthand had an impact on all of us. The American press stopped covering the events unfolding in Japan around a month after the earthquake hit, but still there are people living in temporary housing and foundations of homes laid bare. This was impossible to leave out of the program. We will never forget what we saw there.

Another theme that followed us throughout the Tohoku tour and the rest of the trip was tradition - Japan is full of it. In America, there are no buildings or structures more than a thousand years old, and almost all of the religions practiced came from overseas. I had never been to a foreign country before, so I needed to have cultural experiences like the ones I had in Japan. We had the opportunity to wear yukata or try wadaiko, eat traditional foods, and watch a martial arts demonstration. With our host families, many of us visited shrines, castles, and neighborhood festivals. In other places, we experienced the contrasting, hyper-modern side of Japan. Often, we used our free time to visit arcades, take purikura, and sing karaoke. The few hours we spent in Tokyo were an ideal representation of the ancient and modern sides of Japan coming together. We spent half of our time in Tokyo at Asakusa Kannon Temple, and shopped in Akihabara the other half. It was important for us to see both of those sides of Japanese culture.

Many times on this trip, I was surprised by how easy it was for me to communicate with people. Every instant I was out in Japan, I was learning - with my host family, at schools and in the disaster area. At the same time, though, I was struck by the sheer volume of learning I still have in my future if I want to become fluent in Japanese. This experience has had the double effect of reinforcing my confidence and propelling me forward to learn and learn all I can. In the future, I see myself going to school in Japan, at least doing an exchange there in college, and working there for a few years at least. I loved everything about it, from the skyscrapers to the sidewalks, and I felt so enriched while I was there. There is no way that I could not return.

While I was in Japan, I rarely had a moment to sit down and think about my experience, because I was still in the middle of it. Every thought in this paper rose to the surface of my mind immediately upon my return home. But still, for the next day and a half, the only people I was constantly with were my fellow JET-MIPpers, who had experienced everything alongside me. It was only when I returned home and sat down with my parents that I realized how much I had been through. My parents and my friends have, thankfully, been more than willing to listen to my endless storytelling and look at the hundreds of photos I have taken. Just like I was when I was in Japan, they were delighted at the similarities and differences between there and here. They were surprised to hear how much work there still is to be done in the disaster areas on the coast. I really feel a sense of responsibility to spread the word about that topic in particular, since people are so uninformed about it in the states. My experience is unique in my community, so I have to maximize my opportunity to inform others.

Lastly, I want to thank Taylor Anderson and Monty Dickson for their contributions to the world. So many people in Japan were able to tell us stories about Taylor and Monty. They were so promising and so young when they arrived in Ishinomaki and Rikuzentakata, and that was still true when they lost their lives. Thankfully, before then, they were able to enrich so many people's lives, especially those of their students, who will always remember them. I want to be like Taylor and Monty. I want to help form the bridge between Japan and America. I can imagine what they felt upon arriving in Japan - the sense of wonder and disbelief and the enjoyment of every second. Now, when I have my whole life ahead of

have to live it to its fullest, and live it not just for me, but for everyone around me. And hopefully, I will be able to touch as many lives as Taylor and Monty, and even improve them. This program has changed my life, and I am grateful to every single person I met and those I did not have the opportunity to meet. Thank you, Taylor. Thank you, Monty.

NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION



“Kesennuma Blooming”

This image represents the past and future of Kesennuma, and by extension all of the disaster area along the eastern coast of Japan. Around the flower can be seen the broken remains of homes – the ground a collage of broken tile and brick – but plants, new life, grow in their place, representing hope for the future. This flower in particular stood out to me among all the other plants, almost as if it were the boldest.

Breeze #86



Breeze #85



Breeze #84

Breeze #83



Breeze #82



Breeze #81



Breeze #80



Breeze #79



Breeze #78



Breeze #77



Breeze #76



2014 Kakehashi Report

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