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



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There is no way for me to fully express how honored I am to be a part of the JET-MIP experience. Within the two weeks I've spent in Japan, I grew accustomed to the lifestyle and being around kind-hearted folks. The trip not only helped me ascertain my career goal as a translator for America, Japan, and China, but also allowed me to see and experience the values the Japanese people hold

dearly.

Despite the four years of studying Japanese and surviving the AP exam, I felt belittled compared to rest of the participants. Even in school, I always felt hesitant and shy when it came to contributing to the class. What if I used the particle wrong? What if I conjugated the verb wrong and used it in the wrong tense? What if my answer is just plain wrong? What will people think of me? Those questions play back like a broken record in my head every time the spotlight is at me. The fear of being wrong disabled me from participating in class discussions. During the program, I realized that making mistakes is the best way to improve in language. What was there to be afraid of? Nothing! If I made a mistake in speech or writing, my teachers and friends were there to correct me. If I had a question, someone was bound to provide me a detailed explanation. With those thoughts established, I corrected my wariness and subdued the hesitation that restrained me for so long.

The trip followed an extensive and detailed schedule that kept all of us up and moving each day. Even on a tight schedule, we managed to get each task done. I didn't mind being deprived of sleep. I wanted to be as restless as possible to live each minute and second to make those moments memorable. Whether it was at the Institute, sharing and eating snacks in the lounges, or exchanging laughter in all the hotels that the staff kindly provided for us during our stay.

Before the Tohoku tour, we all went to Japanese classes instructed purely in Japanese. It was nostalgic for me, because I thought back on how my sensei used to teach in my AP Japanese class. I'm glad and grateful because it wasn't so much of a shock for me to adjust. The classes were engaging and productive because of the lively instructors who sought to answer all of our questions. I learned new words and sentence structures throughout the classes and preparations for our final group presentations. Ever

was in the environment where all we all had to utilize our Japanese to get around. Due to that challenge, we all improved in one way or the other. All the people in the Institute came from all over the world and each and every one of them spoke Japanese well. Even if we didn't know each other, we were united under the same goal: to improve in Japanese. It was hard to not find myself beaming back at people walking in and out of elevators at the Institute, and exchanging short greetings in Japanese as we parted ways on different floors.

When we descended to Hanamaki, I saw the open fields and green hills shrouded in wisps of fog through the window and it elicited an eerie and cryptic feeling inside of me. My initial images of Japan were its unrivaled technology and the urban sprawl. Seeing the lush green fields under a grey sky was still beautiful through my eyes, which were so accustomed to seeing tall buildings and concrete from growing up in New York City. No architect could ever raise a structure as majestic as what nature could build.

It was hard for everyone to believe that Rikuzentakata was a big urban center until we saw the mounds of debris, broken down cables and steel columns. I wasn't at home watching reports about the damage on CCTV any more. I was physically there to see the aftermath. It's hard to convince oneself how something like water could tear down such concrete, stabilized structures. How water can rob people of their happiness, belongings and memories. How water is a basic element to sustainability that as we surveyed the damage, some of our eyes grew watery with each step we took. I'm sure everyone had felt a pang of pain in their hearts, but our spirits were uplifted when we prayed at an offering site that housed a memorial to commemorate the lives that were lost to The Great East Earthquake. On the side of the offering site, I saw colorful bundles. I squinted and those bundles turned out to be several thousands of paper cranes. The colors were so bright and lively that it reflected the vibrant, undying hopes of the people in Rikuzentakata and their resilience in the form of a fortified community. To the family of Monty Dickson, you all made his dream a reality by rooting for him and being a part of his life. And through the spirit and hopes of Monty, you support our goals and intentions in involving ourselves with Japan's future--something my own family cannot give to me. For that, thank you so much for giving me this rewarding experience because I saw and experienced what Monty loved so much in his time in Japan. I will do my best to protect Monty's hopes and morals, and keep them alive as I continue my studies in Japanese culture and language.

I wouldn't have been able to fully grasp the story of Taylor Anderson if it wasn't for her loving family who produced a documentary to keep her spirit alive and to inspire future Japanese language learners. Taylor was an idyllic and cheerful woman who tackled every problem in life with a warm smile. How many people can actually do that? The simple and humble things she did on her own time like teaching English to the Kiwi Club reflected her kind persona and her willingness to offer her help to anybody who needed it. We climbed Hiyoriyama with the students of Kobunkan High School. When we made it to the top, a teacher had told us that people escaped to the same mountain we climbed the steps of. And in a way, I vicariously experienced the fear and hysteria of the tsunami when all the people rushing up the steep steps of the mountain. There, we prayed for Taylor Anderson after discovering that was her favorite spot during her stay in Ishinomaki. I enjoyed the dinner with the Kiwi Club and students of Kobunkan High School because I talked in Japanese with the Kiwi Club members and they talked back in English. What had taken me aback the most was that the members of the Kiwi Club were quite aged and their English was incredible. It proves that you are never too old to learn new things. I talked with the people that knew Taylor, and I think I felt the same joy she had when she spent time with them. And I bet the Kiwi Club members felt the same way when they spoke with us, and saw bits of Taylor's dream within us all.

Kesenuma was by far, my favorite part of the whole trip. Hotel Boyo overlooks the town up on hill, and the body of water that harbors boats once more. Hotel Boyo is owned by Tomiko and Eiichi Kato, who welcomed us formally to their small fishing village. I was humbled to be under the care of the Kato family, who endured so many hardships that befell their fishing village after the earthquake and tsunami. I remember when Eiichi Kato was describing how he decline supplies at the hotel, and how he could not offer as much to the people he sheltered. The size of rice balls was cut as much as two thirds to feed the starving people. I imagined the truncated size of a rice ball in my head and the meals I consumed regularly each day. If I were among the people in Hotel Boyo after the disaster, I would have most certainly died of starvation. Ever since we arrived in Kesenuma, there wasn't a single day that the sky was clear and blue until the day we left for Sendai. That moment, even though it was brief, I've never seen such a vast, blue sky accompanied with fleeting clouds. Every tree in the mountains became apparent under the blinding sunlight, and the way they swayed from the wind looked like they were bowing to the sky. At that same moment, I understood how important nature meant to the people in Tohoku. How much they depended on nature to take care of them and vice versa. Kesenuma is the quintessential society that demonstrates the reciprocal dependency between man and nature.

When we first arrived at Sendai, I was still sad that we left Kesenuma. However, I looked forward to exploring the city and meeting my very first host family. Sendai was exciting at night. I explored the city with fellow mippers and we went to an arcade where I won two zipper bracelets from a crane machine (first time I ever got anything from a crane!), explored the mall for potential gifts, took a purikura to capture the excitement of the night, bought stacks of CDs and manga for dirt cheap prices and finally, running back to the hotel with ten minutes to curfew. If that's not a rush, I don't know what is.

The next day, I met my host sister, Sakiko who took me out to dinner with her best friend Yuri, who was hosting my fellow mipper Lian. Sakiko and I took the train to the nearest station by her house. There, my host parents waited for me by their car in the pouring rain, wearing their best smiles and said, "We have long waited for your arrival," then bowed in unison. My host mother found out I did not tried 'gyutan' (grilled cow's tongue) before, and she purposefully made it for me for breakfast. That same morning, Sakiko asked me what was my favorite anime, and I replied Naruto. Without a word, she disappeared upstairs and handed me a Naruto memo pad. She told me it used to be her brother's before he passed away in Fukushima during the disaster. I rejected it at first, but she insisted that I should keep it, and that it was made for me. After we toured Matsushima (one of the three most beautiful sights in Japan), we had to say good-bye at the hotel. My host mother pulled me into a hug without any warning, and then broke it without any warning. She kept on apologizing with tears streaming down her face. I pulled her back into a longer hug until she quelled. They made me feel like I was always a part of the family, despite the short time we spent together. While my other group members had late night excursions in the city and received lavish gifts, I just sat down with my host family and spent hours exchanging questions, talking to one another and laughing. To me, that was the greatest gift of all.

My host sister from Osaka, Hiyori was a third year student at Senboku High School. Communicating with my host family was a bit difficult because of the infamous Osaka dialect, but they explained to me whenever I wasn't able to understand. Hiyori's older sister, Koharu majors in English at Kansai University of Foreign Language and she spoke with me in English whenever she could while I reciprocated in Japanese. My host mother was so lively and excited when she met me and we bonded even more when I discovered she liked Naruto as well. I met my host father at home, and he immediately took me out to eat sushi as soon as I answered no when he asked if I had any from Japan already. They loved hearing my life stories from New York City and my aspirations in what I plan to do later in my life. My host family was so gle¹ - - -¹ thrilled when I told them I have my mind set on becoming a translator for Japan, America and China

Aside from the tours and intense Japanese classes, I enjoyed spending time with other mippers. We shared food that we bought from the convenience stores and had mini parties until a yawn escapes from our mouths. I remember sitting by the staircase with Nanette, laughing over the same video until one of us busted a lung. It was fortunate that the Japanese students introduced an app called 'LINE' for free texting and calls. As soon as we got back to America, we all made an account and added each other. Not only do we keep in touch with each other, but with our new Japanese friends as well. It's impossible for me not to talk to the friends I've made in this program. Somewhere in the future, we will see each other again, and again, and again. This program made me a more open-minded, and less of an introverted person. I've become more social, and that's all thanks to this year's wonderful batch of people.

"How can we be a bridge between the United States and Japan?" With numerous possibilities and answers, the best way is through establishing communication. In any relationship, communication is what establishes the trust and the feelings to keep the bond alive and stronger. I'm glad that the United States and Japan have economic relationships, and I hope the countries will increase diplomatic connections to further develop the bridge between us. This trip confirmed my decision to study in Japan so that I can better understand the country's values, its people and their customs so when I bring those stories of what I learned back to the United States, more people will be inspired to learn Japanese. I will continue my studies with Japanese and work towards my goal as a translator. I want to show my family and prove to people it is possible to work in a field that you love and passionate about. This is only my first step. All I need to do is to take the second one.

NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION



“Under the Same Sky”

The picture was taken outside Hotel Boyo on our last day. Of all the days we spent in Kesenuma, it was clear on our last day. I saw the true valor and humble grandeur of Kesenuma under the vast blue sky that harbored so many unique clouds; I barely believed that I was under the same sky. No amount of damage could displace the people from living under the sky of Kesenuma.

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