

## DECEMBER, 2014: BREEZE ISSUE #86

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



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When I was a child, I had two dreams: to go to Japan, and to make amazing friends. This July, I managed to fulfill both of those dreams at once. The JET Memorial Invitation Program has not only helped us as participants to fulfill our dreams, but also to inspire us and others with the dreams of two beloved JET teachers that lost their lives during the disaster in 2011.

The program itself was incredible. In just two short weeks, I found myself flying on more planes than I ever thought I would, making an overwhelming amount of new amazing friends, visiting a plethora of interesting and historical sites, and immersing myself in Japan and its culture. One of my goals for the program was to speak as much Japanese as possible in order to improve, and I was not disappointed. While we were still able to speak a fair amount of English, it was very easy to immerse oneself when shopping at the nearby malls, or communicating with one's host family; this helped with my conversational Japanese quite a bit.

At times, due to the comfort and atmosphere of the Japanese Language Institute in Kansai, I forgot that we were in a different country altogether. We spent most of our free time going to the nearby malls and exploring the area, and really getting to know one another.

However, we experienced a serious time in the trip when we visited Tohoku. Although this portion of the trip was cut short due to the typhoon that was supposed to pass through Kansai, resulting in us visiting Nara instead, I still managed to take a lot from our trip there. We visited Ishinomaki and Sendai and not only connected with many high schoolers, but also listened to survivors of the disaster and friends of Taylor Anderson and Monty Dickson. Mr. Endo's Rainbow Bridge and Taylor's Bookshelf were very difficult places to visit, and many tears were shed. It was a very emotional and humbling time in the trip, and I feel that we were able to learn a great deal about the past, present, and future situation in not only the Tohoku area, but for the people of Tohoku.

The homestay was one of our latest activities over the course of the two weeks, but it also became many of our favorites. We were able to stay with a Japanese family in Osaka, and really connect with them and became so close with my family, calling my host mother "Mama," wearing matching dresses with my

sister Nagisa, and talking about learning English with my other host sister Shione. Together we went shopping, made takoyaki, discussed differences and similarities between our countries, visited Osaka castle, and took a ton of pictures together. In only two days, I found a second family, and that was one of the most memorable parts of this experience.

It was thanks to the homestay and trip to Tohoku that my casual interest in pursuing a career related to Japanese became a real passion. It may have been the inspiration I got from hearing how amazing Taylor and Monty felt while they were pursuing their dreams in Japan as part of the JET program, and how they were an important part of their communities; or it may have been seeing how it truly was to rely on nothing but what I'd learned in my six years of Japanese study while communicating entirely in Japanese to my host family. Whatever the reason, I now have my goals focused on applying for the JET program or similar programs once I finish my first four years of college, and then pursuing a career in translation or interpretation in the future. While these dreams may very well change somewhere down the road, it is great to have a direction and a solid goal to work for, and I'm so grateful for this program for nudging me down this path.

Of course, after an amazing experience like this, I shared many stories with my friends and family during and after the trip. Since there was internet at the institute, I was able to keep people posted on a day-to-day basis on Twitter and using email. Since many of my friends share my passion for Japanese language and culture, I felt as though while I was sending them some of the pictures I'd taken that they could help further one of the themes of the program by being bridges between Japanese and American students as well. As for my family, I tried my best to get them to understand the meaning of the trip and my experiences as best as I could, and I definitely think that the Tohoku portion of the trip stuck with them the most. My mother admitted to being emotional when seeing the photos I'd taken at Mr. Endo's Rainbow Bridge, and I took that to mean that she was able to understand and make her own connections to a country she never had any connection with beforehand; this made me feel as though it could be quite simple to make these sorts of bridges between America and Japan in this way. A rainbow is a symbol of beauty after something miserable like rain, and it also forms the shape of a bridge. I feel as though this mental image is one that stayed with me well after the trip had ended—that of many rainbows appearing in the sky with each new connection formed.

Finally, my message to Taylor and Monty is simply this: thank you.

Thank you for pursuing and living your dreams, and doing so while smiling. Although I never had the chance to meet you, or speak to you, the spirit that you both possessed inspired me greatly, and continues to inspire both me and countless other people whose lives you have touched. You've created a legacy that allows others who are just like you to live their dreams as well, and I feel as though wherever you are, you must be happy knowing that, and knowing that your families are helping to spread your love for Japan and its culture among many people.

Thank you.

A final thank you as well to not only Taylor and Monty, but to everyone who made this trip possible, and accommodated the 32 of us throughout Japan, allowing us to fulfill our dreams. Thank you for inspiring me anew to continue studying Japanese. Thank you for allowing us to be a bridge between America and Japan. And thank you to Japan for never giving up, and continuing to show your strength even when struck by disaster. Many more rainbows will appear in the sky, signaling the end of the rain and bridging our countries.

# NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION



“Growth in Ishinomaki”

This was taken in Ishinomaki near the Rainbow Bridge; there were pink flowers growing near a pile of rubble. I thought this particular spot in Ishinomaki was a good representation of the current situation: something beautiful growing from destruction, just as the strength of survivors of the disaster is showing after such a horrible thing had happened.

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