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



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This past summer, I had the greatest experience of my entire life. As dramatic as that sounds, it isn't an exaggeration; the JET Memorial Invitation Program really did change my life. I don't remember what I was expecting, but I was in for a huge culture shock when we finally arrived in Japan.

Despite its negative connotation, I was actually pleasantly surprised. Everyone displayed the kind of politeness you would only receive in America at a 5-star hotel from people whose salary depended on it. The service, the people, the cars, even the toilets were completely different from what we were used to. Luckily, I quickly adjusted and can even say that I miss a lot of the things unique to Japan.

During our time in Japan, the Japan Foundation did a fantastic job of making sure we were as comfortable as possible. Although the eco-conscious Kansai Institute didn't have air conditioning everywhere, almost every room had its own a/c unit that allowed us to survive the grueling Japanese heat. The location of the institute gave us plenty of options during our free time, the beach and two malls not more than 15 minutes away. Our supervisors, though strict when need be, allowed us to explore Japan to our hearts' desire; we were treated and respected as adults. The trust they had in us forced us to be even more responsible than if we had been seen as children that needed to be babysat 24 hours a day.

Unfortunately, only about two days after we arrived in Japan a giant typhoon struck the coast. To ensure our safety, the plans made to travel during those few days were cancelled, for to miss a few opportunities to interact with Japanese high school students. The Japan

Foundation quickly arranged other cultural activities to guarantee that we would make the most of our time on the trip. There was never a dull moment; we were up early and out until about 8 pm everyday either visiting an ancient shrine or exercising our Japanese with local high school students. “Bored” just wasn’t in our vocabulary.

Before heading off to Japan I was scared to death; how could I survive with the little Japanese I know? Even though I had studied the language for three years prior to the trip, I had little confidence in my ability to hold a conversation entirely in Japanese. It seemed like everyone else was a hundred times better than me, I couldn’t help but feel intimidated. After arriving in Japan, the truth revealed itself: we were all on the same boat. Instead of making us feel even worse, our teachers and high school exchange buddies helped us every step of the way. The full immersion that comes with living in the language’s country forced me- all of us, really- to improve exponentially. This trip has only strengthened my love for the language and its culture.

When I first entered this program, I didn’t expect to make any friends. It seemed impossible to really get to know anyone in just three weeks. But in those three weeks, I made friends that I know will last me a lifetime. We felt the kind of instant connection that comes with sharing a common interest, in our case Japan. It didn’t take long to realize we shared so much more, things that brought us closer together in three weeks than I am with people I’ve known for years. We made so many memories that you can only make on a trip like this, memories that bind us together. It’s hard to imagine life without them.

A majority of the exchanges we had with high school students happened while we were in the Tohoku region. Three years ago, Japan was devastated by the strongest earthquake in its history that triggered a tsunami with waves reaching up to 130 feet. The disaster, now known as 3.11, concentrated itself in Tohoku, destroying almost all the buildings in the entire region. While we were in Tohoku it was difficult to think that these children and teenagers we were laughing with and playing with had lost everything just three years ago. With the amount of stress and pain they all must have gone through I feel honored to have brought even the tiniest of smiles to their faces.

One of my favorite places we went to in Japan was the Rainbow Bridge built by Mr. Endo with whom which we had the pleasure to meet. Mr. Endo is one of the strongest people that I have ever met. Even after losing his own three children during 3.11, his first priority was ensuring the safety and happiness of those around him. It’s hard not to admire someone with that level of selflessness, a level that could only be equated to a superhero. When asked about the 3 poles jutting out from the bridge, Mr. Endo explained that he wanted to inspire the people of Japan to always look upward, to always look toward a brighter, better future. I like to think that our being there and listening to their stories remind them that they are not alone in their fight; we’re fighting alongside them.

I hope that Taylor Anderson and Montgomery Dickson, the two ALTs to which this program is dedicated, can feel at ease knowing that their dream of bridging Japan and America will never be forgotten. I know that myself, along with the others that have completed the JET Men

Invitation Program, will work toward realizing that very same dream. Mine is just one more life among the hundreds they've already touched, and for that I couldn't be more thankful.

NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION



“Hope”

The rainbow bridge built by Mr. Endo. Seeing this bridge always reminds me of the incredible strength of the Japanese, especially those in the Tohoku area. They were able to come together as a community and fight for a better future.

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Japanese Language Education Update 16

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2014 JET-MIP Report: Kyle Smith

2014 JET-MIP Report: Jacqueline Tran

2014 JET-MIP Report: Britta Smith

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