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



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I knew from the moment I landed in L.A. that this trip was going to be an experience of a lifetime. I immediately started making friends with the other participants, and I knew that we had a lot to look forward to together. On the flight to Japan, they served us breakfast, or some sort of meal, it was hard to tell with the time change from the flight. This is what I considered my first meal in Japan. From thereon out, I was ready and willing to experience the food, the culture, the people, and the language.

When we landed in Haneda Airport, I was itching to go outside, but knew we still had a another flight to get on in order to get to Kansai, our first stop. I started to notice all the similarities and differences that surrounded me. This was one of the nicest, cleanest airports I had been to in my life. There were signs covered in kanji surrounding me, slowing my pace as I tried to read and understand them. A woman was speaking in Japanese over the intercom, which over the course of the trip I got so used to hearing. There were dozens of vending machines, too, which I soon found out were my best friends wherever I went.

When I first stepped outside of the Kansai airport, the environment felt so different from the U.S. The trees were different, the streets were different, the vehicles were different, the air was different. Everything felt so fresh and welcoming. I got on the bus and we went over a long bridge to get to the Institute. Here I was captivated by the vast ocean and the rolling mountains off in the horizon (being from the Midwest, I never get to see mountains). When we got to

Institute, they started by giving us a tour. A lot of it was spoken in Japanese, and I was surprised to realize how much of it I actually understood. Before going on the trip I was nervous that I wouldn't be able to communicate or understand well, but once I got surrounded by it, I felt comfortable.

We were only at the Institute for a short time, and then we took off again. We went to so many places over a short amount of time, but I feel like I saw, experienced, and learned so much within the amount of time we had at each location we visited. We had enough time to try new foods, talk to new people, explore new places, and learn new things. From all of these things, my Japanese abilities truly began to show themselves. It's one thing learning the language in a class at school for an hour every day of the week, but it has no comparison to placing yourself in a position where you can only speak, read, and write in that language.

From talking to Japanese people, even just everyday interactions like buying drinks from the convenience store or asking directions on the street, my confidence in being able to speak and understand Japanese soared. Going on this trip has made me realize how much I love the language, that my decision to take Japanese in high school was the right choice, and that I want to continue learning and using Japanese in the future. Thinking back on the trip now has made me think a lot about my future, and it's made me realize that I'd like to do more with Japanese --and hopefully other languages-- in my future career. I don't know exactly what I want to do, but I'm searching.

I was able to talk to a lot of people while on this trip, and I feel like I made a connection with a lot of them, but there is one particular person whose friendship I will not forget. While staying at Hotel Boyo in Kesenuma, I went down to the lobby early in the morning to buy a drink from the vending machine. I went over and sat down on one of the couches in the lobby to get some sunlight and look outside. On the other side of the room at the counter was an employee of the hotel. He started to talk to me in English, and I responded in Japanese. Though it was hard because he was not fluent in English and I was not fluent in Japanese, our conversation was flowing pretty well. We talked about a lot of things, such as studying Japanese, baseball, and places we'd been.

After a while I found it to be tedious to talk to each other from all the way across the room, so I went up to the front counter. I asked him what his name was, and at first I didn't understand what he was saying, so he went into the back room, got a piece of paper and pencil for me, and wrote down his name in kanji. His name was Kumagai Toshiaki. Then he began to explain the kanji for me when I asked him what they meant. He even brought out a dictionary to show me. Then I wrote my name down on the paper, both in English and in Katakana. I asked him if I could keep the paper, and he laughed and said yes. Then I said goodbye and went to breakfast upstairs.

The next day was our last day at the hotel, so in the morning after breakfast I went downstairs in an effort to run into a few of my friends so we could go out and explore together, but I run into anyone. After waiting around for a few minutes, I decided that I would just go off own. Before I left Kumagai noticed that I was going to leave and asked me where I was going,

and I told him I was going on a walk. Then he said he noticed a few from my group had left a few minutes before I came down. I thanked him and left. After walking for a bit I noticed some of my friends down the street, but I didn't go running after them. Instead I just kept walking, and ran across a Shinto shrine, and beyond it a hiking trail. I decided to go up it, and the view from high up of the town was really beautiful. Heading back I was so excited to get to the hotel and tell my new friend all about what I had seen, but when I got back, he wasn't at the front desk. I wasn't able to see him before I left, though I had wanted to. I still have the piece of paper he gave me, and I keep it with all of my treasures from Japan.

I could write thousands of pages about this trip, and the small portion of that here cannot fully express everything I felt, saw, heard, and did on the trip. I had made so many good memories and close friends, but I think what I've written is enough to give a vague picture of what happened. Now here's a message for Taylor Anderson and Montgomery Dickson, two brave ambassadors who sacrificed themselves to help those in need:

To Taylor and Monty,

I know I've never met you, but I've heard a lot about you. About your family, your friends, your life and influence in Japan, and the way you both have done so many great things from the bottom of your heart. You didn't do anything to better yourselves, it was for others. I know I probably wouldn't have known you if you were still living, but from what I know, I would've wanted to be your friends. Monty, your sense of humor would have fit well with mine, and Taylor, your love of books is just like mine. I remember hearing about the tsunami on the news back when it happened, and I remember forgetting about it so quickly. At the time I had no idea how big it was, how much it affected people, and how it was going to affect me in the future. Both of you were so strong and you fought to protect people, so thank you. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to experience what you have, even though I cannot compare my experience to yours, even the slightest bit.

本当にありがとうございました

Bridget Keeney

NIPPON THROUGH MY EYES PHOTO SUBMISSION

“Traditional 和菓子 (Japanese sweets)”

I stopped at a small traditional cafe at Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto, where I got matcha, which came with a small piece of candy made of red bean. I loved all the food in Japan (especially red bean), but I was scared to try matcha for some reason, though once I tried it, I couldn't get enough of it.



Breeze #98



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2015 JET-MIP Essay: Angela Li

2015 JET-MIP Essay: Taylor-Anne Kim

2015 JET-MIP Essay: Bridget Keeney

Breeze #97



Breeze #96



Breeze #95



Breeze #94



Breeze #93



Breeze #92



Breeze #91



Breeze #90

Breeze #89



Breeze #88



Breeze #87



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