

Confronting Challenges

How on earth do I sum up the best yet most challenging year of my life? I seem to have a case of writers block. Glancing around my room for inspiration, my gaze falls on my now dog-eared, worn-out 2008-2009 JET pocket diary. I inadvertently pick it up off the *kotatsu* and quickly flick through last weeks schedule to jog my memory. Meetings, school visits, disaster prevention training, interpreting, international events, charity work. Phew. There were countless challenges this week. But, in saying that, I feel incredibly lucky to have been given these opportunities.

I have come a very long way since my arrival to Japan from New Zealand 1 year ago. Actually, I had cried on and off during the whole 11 hour plane ride over to Japan and even sobbed throughout “Kung Fu Panda” – specifically the scene when Po the panda tells his dad how much he loves him. Apologies to the person stuck sitting next to me on the flight. I believe there is an expectation that CIRs, who speak Japanese, are immune to culture shock. But, we are all human, and everyone, whether CIR or ALT, is leaving behind their loved ones to meet with the unknown. JET Programme participants really are amazingly resilient people. They seek out challenge. It takes an especially strong person to be able to move to a foreign country where your native language is not spoken.

While culture shock is one obstacle that all of us JETs may go

through during our time in Japan, mastering Japanese is a challenge JETs face daily. To be completely honest, I used to have a minor heart attack when faced with a page of *kanji*. While I was one of the lucky few to be selected as a CIR, the last time I had spoken Japanese regularly was 7 years ago in 2002 when my parents – who I will forever be indebted to – funded my 10 month long high school exchange to Japan. I studied at Tohoku High School in Sendai and was treated like a regular student in my *sannensei* class, complete with English lessons with the ALT from Canada. During my exchange I learned that Japanese is by no means easy, but it is not impossible if you work at it.

When I first opened my email inbox at Sendai International Center, which was practically overflowing with Japanese emails, I was very tempted to hit the “delete all” button. But instead I painstakingly read every email in the inbox, including all the junk mail. Even now there are still many *kanji* that I have to look up, but if you dream of being better at something, sometimes you have to just force yourself to get on with it.

Although I had written a paper for university on “Japanese Business Culture” before coming to Japan, I was still amazed at the vast cultural differences between Japan and New Zealand. I still remember my first work related phone call. My colleague had called

A Home Away From Home

After graduating from college with a degree in Chinese Studies, I took up the job as a marketing officer but I soon realised that I am not cut out for a nine-to-five office job. On top of the day job, I also worked as a freelance translator which I enjoyed tremendously. However, at the back of my head, I knew that I wanted something more - for the first time, I wanted to get out of my comfort zone and explore the unfamiliar. Well, strictly speaking, Japan was not a completely unfamiliar territory to me. I had studied the Japanese language as a foreign language during my Junior High School days in Singapore and I had always wanted to visit Japan. So as a graduation trip, I went to Tokyo with a friend in August 2006 and immediately fell in love with the place, the people and the culture. Not only was I motivated to pick up the Japanese language once again, I was determined to find a job in Japan so as to experience living in this country.

The same friend with whom I visited Japan later introduced me to the JET Program. Without further ado (well, after all the deadline was approaching), I got down to the application and within a week, I managed to put together the application. After what seemed like

eternity, I was elated to receive the news that I was one of the 22 successful applicants from Singapore to be selected for the JET Program. In the application, we could state our preference for placement. However, since I had only been to Tokyo, I was curious about living in other parts of Japan, so I did not state any preference for placement. But secretly, I prayed that I would not be sent to the north where it might be too cold for me to handle. When I found out that I was placed in Miyazaki Prefecture, my mom, who had all along been equally excited about the JET Program, whipped out the world map and located it to be in Kyushu. A quick search on the internet told me that Miyazaki boasts a year-round climate with beautiful sceneries, plays a prominent part in Japanese mythology and a famous governor who was once a comedian! I congratulated myself for my good luck and started preparing for my departure. Like several other JET participants from Singapore, naturally we were concerned with the climate because having lived in Singapore for so long, we might not be able to adapt the cold winter in Japan. But little did I know that the houses in Kyushu are not designed and built for the cold at all!

I am very lucky to be an ALT in Izumigaoka High School. It is

Krystal Lynes

me and I patiently listened while she explained what it was she wanted me to assist with. “*Moshi moshi???*” asked the caller, “Krystal are you there?” “Ahhh, yes?” I replied, confused. Where else would I be? Only afterwards did I learn a cultural lesson on the importance of *aisuchi*, that is, the importance of letting the person you are talking to know that you are listening.

There have been numerous other cultural lessons since then and I imagine that there are an infinite number more to come. Also I have finally realized that it does not matter whether or not I speak Japanese fluently. What really matters is attitude. Be positive. Challenge yourself. It does not even matter whether you succeed or fail, so long as you learned something new from the experience. It certainly does not matter if you make mistakes when you speak Japanese, everyone will appreciate that you made the effort to communicate.

While perseverance and good dose of understanding have been paramount to overcoming the various obstacles I have faced, I am lucky to have a few other things in my favor such as living in the best city in Japan. The day of my arrival, August 6, 2008 was also coincidentally midway through the Sendai Tanabata festival, the most famous Tanabata festival in Japan. I vividly remember wading through the giant Tanabata decorations which lined the streets and

the sweet waffle-like smell of *taiyaki* wafting through the arcades. Memories from my exchange came flooding back. Writing about the joys of Sendai will require a separate article. But better still, come visit Sendai and discover for yourself why they call Sendai the “City of Trees.”

Another blessing about being here is the people I work with. My colleagues at Sendai City Hall and Sendai International Center work so hard to increase intercultural understanding and promote Sendai to the world. They work even harder to help support Sendai’s foreign citizens, including me. I feel so grateful to all of them. Most importantly my colleagues have helped support me with kindness and understanding and I could not have made it through this year without them.

I flick to the back of my battered diary, trying to decipher my scribbles and look at the schedule ahead. Looks busy - *Yokatta!* I think back to earlier this morning when a co-worker asked if I needed any help writing this piece. I smiled and said “thank you” and “I’ll do my best.” And as I think of the upcoming challenges ahead of me this year, I intend to do just that.

英語

Huiru Xie

a traditional academic high school well-known for our well-behaved students who excel in both academic and club activities. Indeed, I have found the students to be conscientious, friendly and cheerful. Nothing gratifies me more than a “Hello! How are you?” or “Good morning!” from the students (and teachers) as we walk past each other along the corridor. While the students may be a little shy to speak up in class, they are often eager to speak English to me outside of the classrooms. They are definitely hard workers who do their best in everything - be it studies, sports day, school cultural festival, or the inter-class volleyball games - they always put up a great performance that never fails to amaze and move me. Whenever people hear that I am working at Izumigaoka High School, they would exclaim what a great school it is. Our high school also owes its fame to the famous Miyazaki Prefecture Governor, Higashikokubaru, who had graduated from this high school.

The past two years in Izumigaoka High School have been anything but a fulfilling and enjoyable journey. Once in a while, my teachers would ask if I ever got homesick. I would be lying if I said no. However, the homesickness never lasted long enough to get me

down. The teachers, the office people, the bread shop lady and of course the students, are always very kind and friendly to me, making me feel like I belong to this one big family. Besides having a great working relationship in school, my teachers and I would also hang out after work. We have taken road trips, checked out new restaurants in town, gone for concerts and so on. They are my colleagues, but they have also become my friends without whom I would be so lonely and lost. Some of them introduced me to their families, took me along with them to their family outings and invited me to stay over at their houses.

The past two years have slipped by so quickly and quietly. With just one more year to the end of my contract, I am living everyday as if it were my last day in this school. This is the first time I am living away from home for such a long time, and everyone whom I have met played a part in making my stay so wonderful and memorable. To borrow one of my favourite quotes, “When I count my blessings, I count you twice.” Thank you, Izumigaoka High School, you are definitely my home away from home.

英語