

Pursuing Japan

Emily Ellis

September 9, 2015

My desire to study Japanese was originally borne out of obligation. Being a third-generation Japanese I did not grow up speaking the language. I felt that, since my ancestors made the effort to come to America and learn English, I should reciprocate the effort. It was worth it.

In 2014 I graduated with a BA in Leadership and Public Policy from UVA. That was also the year I was accepted into the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, and was placed in Yokohama-machi, Aomori Prefecture. This is not the Yokohama famous for its proximity to Tokyo. It is a small fishing town of 4,500 people on the northern tip of Honshu. The nearest English-speakers lived in a city north of me, 1.5 hours round trip by car. That was exactly what I wanted: to be surrounded by Japanese and to have no excuse for not using the language every day.

Prior to moving to Yokohama-machi, I was quite nervous. I only studied Japanese for my 2nd and 3rd years in college, which meant there was an entire year before JET that I did not speak or study the language. Apparently, the intense 5-days-a-week-for-two-years method at UVA was well worth the while because the grammar and vocabulary stuck with me.

I was also nervous about choosing to teach in a fishing village over a lucrative office job in DC. I had interviewed for a well-paying consulting firm that seemed to have more relevant connections to my dreams of a career in politics.

But something did not sit right with me. Japan is where I wanted to go and, to my relief, my gut was right. Living in Aomori opened up more doors than I could have imagined when I was in college. In terms of career assets I acquired, I became conversational in a foreign language and I learned about the Japanese education system and politics behind it. My personal relationships grew to be far more meaningful than any career aspirations I had. I learned how not to be so anxious and caught up with how people perceive me. Since I did not speak fluent Japanese and my coworkers barely knew any English, there was no room for feeling embarrassed about my Japanese grammar or pronunciation. This was the quickest way to learn Japanese...and to make new friends.

Interacting with children was the best part of my job. They taught me about Japanese culture, how to listen for Japanese keywords when they talked a mile-a-minute, and how to take joy in simple things like playing janken a million times at lunch!

I went into JET thinking I would stay for two years, but had a change of heart halfway through. Again, I did not know exactly why and I felt almost silly for forgoing another fantastic year in JET. I had dreams of doing something in the vein of Japanese politics, but with my level of Japanese that seemed nearly impossible.

I worried for three months about what I would do next since there did not seem to be any opportunities other than teaching English. Luckily, after submitting many applications, I heard back from a government relations firm in Tokyo about an internship. I was very upfront with my Japanese abilities, but also told them how enthusiastic I was about the opportunity. Somehow, persistence

and following my gut worked out for me. This month I return to Tokyo for another three months to experience a completely new facet of Japan.

Even though I did not major in Japanese and, to be honest, was never particularly good at the language, persistence and following my interests brought me to Japan. It is what allowed me to make lifelong friends and explore a beautiful, foreign culture. And, along the way, it even furthered my career interests in a way that I had never imagined.