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Iverson '05 experiences Japanese culture as JET teacher

Summary: Since August 2005, Becky Iverson '05 has been a participant in the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET).

(March 2, 2007)-Since August 2005, University of Minnesota, Morris graduate Becky Iverson '05 has been a participant in the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET). The program, celebrating its 20th year, promotes grassroots international exchange at the community level by placing young graduates from over 44 different countries as English teaching assistants in schools throughout Japan. Iverson is in her second year of a two-year commitment. Through a question and answer session, Iverson, a native of Watertown, South Dakota, reflects on her experiences in Japan.

Tell us about your work.

As an assistant language teacher, I team-teach grades 7 to 12 English with a Japanese teacher at two high schools and a school for the deaf. I run an English club, judge speech competitions, run mock English college interviews, make presentations at JET conferences, and take sign language and Japanese classes.

Sometimes I feel that my “real job” is exposing students to the world beyond Japan. I live in Yamaguchi, by Japanese standards, a small town of 120,000 people in one of the most rural areas of Japan. Most students’ image of the U.S. is shaped by Hollywood and based on stereotypes. My students tend to lump foreign countries together. They ask me about *gaikoku* (abroad) culture, as if it were one culture. I tell them, “I know about life in parts of the U.S., and in parts of Spain, but I don’t know about the rest of the world.”

I also think my job is to teach my students that English is a language, not a set of rules. The Japanese college entrance exam, which is the focus of academic life, tests English, but mostly it tests English test-taking skills, not communicative ability. I always ask my students, “How are you?” and when I first arrived, they would all answer, “Fine, thank you, and you?” They didn’t realize that asking “How are you” actually meant something, and could be the start of a conversation. They were used to giving the automatic response they learned in junior high school. I’ve made a little progress now only half of them answer with “Fine, thank you.” That is the sort of thing that is difficult to teach in a class of 40 students, so my out of class interactions with students are probably more important than the formal teaching I do.

I also try to introduce fun activities to teach about American culture, and nothing is more fun than learning about food culture! I made a traditional turkey dinner for Thanksgiving with my English club, and we made and decorated cookies for Christmas. If the recipes are in English, they are learning!

Tell us about where you live.

I live in an apartment in the center of Yamaguchi. It’s a Japanese-style apartment, which means that I sleep on the tatami-mat floor on a futon. In authentic Japanese style, it has no insulation, and no central heat. Buildings here are constructed to be cool in summer, and the cold of winter is just meant to be put up with, as far as I can tell.

The scenery in Yamaguchi is a little different from that of Morris! This entire country is covered with mountains, so in every direction, I can see beautiful, tree-covered mountains. I am about 20 miles from the ocean, and about 30 miles from a nice beach. The unfortunate part about the beaches, though, is that we can't go swimming after August because of jellyfish. I had an unfortunate encounter with a pair of jellyfish my first summer here, so I'm a bit wary of getting in the ocean once jellyfish season starts!

Have you interacted with other JET participants?

JET participants come from all over the world, and not just from English-speaking countries. Most of us come from the big English-speaking countries, like the U.S., Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. In my area, there are also JETs from Jamaica and Spain. It's kind of funny, but I moved to what is perhaps the most ethnically homogenous country in the world, and here I've met people from all corners of the globe. That's one of the most interesting things about being a visible minority here. There are so few foreigners in this part of Japan that if I see another foreigner on a train or around town, I often strike up a conversation with them. Being non-Japanese in Japan gives us common ground, no matter where we're originally from.

What has surprised you?

I was surprised by how much English, considered "cool," has been integrated into Japanese. Nearly everyone in Japan has studied English, but most don't know it well. The result is strange, convoluted English everywhere, like "Do you like today's yourself?" on a T-shirt worn by a four-year-old girl. I doubt she or her parents were intending to ask a deep, philosophical question.

What has been challenging?

The language. I majored in Spanish, studied abroad in Spain, and studied some French and Portuguese, so I was confident about my ability. It turns out it's more difficult to learn a language that's unrelated to your native language. I didn't speak Japanese when I arrived, so I went from a college-educated adult to being completely illiterate, dependent on others for everything from reading menus to getting on the right train. I've made progress. I now read and write Japanese as well as a third grader, but my speaking skills are at a kindergarten level, though in my defense, small children are remarkably good at speaking their native language!

Would you recommend living abroad to others?

I strongly recommend an experience like this or study abroad to fellow UMMers. The people I've met and the experiences I've had have taught me a lot about myself and where I come from, in addition to teaching me about the culture and way of life in a completely foreign place. I would never consider myself to be closed-minded, but it's easy to claim to be open-minded when you rarely run into people who are different from you. Living in Japan has tested ideas I had about who I was, because here I'm no longer surrounded by people with similar upbringings and ideas. I've started to look at aspects of my home culture differently. For example, the Japanese garbage system is complicated, and it's difficult to throw most things away. As a result, I buy less stuff. I don't think my life is less rich, and I have more travel money!

Photo: Becky Iverson '05 (right) team-teaches English in Yamaguchi, Japan with Hiroe Serai (left).

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