



# Stephanie

from Burlington  
&  
Burlington  
Lakeshore  
to  
Japan

*"There is nothing more satisfying than doing something you previously thought impossible. I seem to do that almost once a week here."*



I have now lived in Japan for six months. Time seems to go slow here but at the same time incredibly fast. I have spent Christmas, New Years and my 18<sup>th</sup> Birthday away from home on the other side of the world. I traveled to Nara, the oldest city in Japan and Kyoto, the cultural hotspot of Japan. I changed host families twice. I had my first onsen (naked traditional Japanese hot spring) experience, I made my best friend who does not speak the same first language as me and I have had dozens of happy days, sad days and just plain neutral days here.

A concept that exchange has enabled me to explore that I want to share with you is that of gratitude and its importance. Some of the first words that exchange students learn in their new language are "thank you". Exchange students find themselves repeating those words thousands of times a day from the moment they step forth in their exchange country. From "thank you for dinner" to "thank you for your kindness" to "thank you for your friendship", it seems that on exchange there are a million things to be thankful for. Even though I continually say "thank you" and even show my appreciation in other ways towards others,

I have come to realize that the million 'Arigatou's' I have said in Japan do not even begin to describe the gratefulness that I feel here. The principle of "Being Grateful" on exchange that we learn during the Rotary training represents much more than just appreciating what others do for you. It is telling us to take a step back and be grateful for life and everything it entails. From appreciating my family in Canada to appreciating myself and everything that I am, learning to "Be Grateful" on exchange past the basic "thank you's" has made me an overall happier person.

Speaking of being grateful, I am also extremely appreciative of this experience. Living in a new country for a year makes me feel like an excited child again and essentially, that's what I am in Japan. When I arrived, I did not know how to speak, proper Japanese manners and etiquette, how to navigate my surroundings. I did not even know how to eat properly with chopsticks! Yet, I grew up. Through many firsts such as; my first day of Japanese school, my first tea ceremony, my first speech and many more, I learned how to function as a teenager in Japanese society. My "firsts" have continued all the way through exchange as well, each one making me feel like a child again in the best possible way.

Even just last week I experienced my first snowfall in Japan that had my friends and I running around throwing snowballs and standing in awe of the beautiful Japanese landscapes covered in snow. Some of these 'firsts' I am describing might not seem like a big deal to others, but to exchange students every one of them is magical and exciting.



It is easy to be grateful for these exciting and happy times. The times that make me feel the indescribable feeling of equal parts independence and adventure that is unique to the youth exchange experience. Something that I have struggled with though, is learning to be grateful for the bad moments of exchange as well, because (as I now have learned), they are something to be grateful for. The lonely nights (and days), the scary moments of earthquakes and illnesses and hailstorms and confusion. The frustration, the anger, the crying. These downs, these low moments are the ones that I believe I should be the most grateful for. Those moments when all I want is a hug from my Mom or for someone at school to understand me, those are the ones that make exchange so powerful. I realize now that those moments made me grow more than any other moment in my life.



Even more than that, the bad moments here make the good moments even better. I've had a million *on top of the world moments* as well, where I feel happier than I've ever felt. There is nothing more satisfying than doing something you thought impossible and I seem to do that almost once a week here. From speaking Japanese in front of thousands of people, to learning a new martial art in a language I do not understand, to overcoming thousands of emotional and physical obstacles that at first seemed insurmountable, these experiences could not be duplicated in any other circumstance.

The bad moments also make it so much easier for me to appreciate the people in my life here and all that they do for me. The Japanese culture of kindness and generosity is so beautiful and something that I appreciate every day here. There are so many people that without even knowing me have performed little acts of kindness for me, without the intention of receiving anything in return. My host Mother making special soup for me when I am sick, my best Japanese friend Machi putting presents beside me on our school trip for me to wake up to on Christmas morning when I missed home, those were the moments I realized how small the world really is. These people did those things because they cared about me, regardless of what country I am from and what language I speak. I know I will leave this experience with the utmost faith in humanity and appreciation for the Japanese culture and Japanese people. Even more than that though, I will leave with the intention of spreading the news that wherever you are in the world, people are fundamentally the same. This is a very powerful message to spread and I believe that every Rotary Youth Exchange student leaves the program with the intention of spreading it.



The last thing that I will discuss is my gratefulness for my friends specifically, especially my Japanese friends. My best Japanese friend's name is Machi (she goes by a shortened version of her last name, a common practice in Japan). We met in English club at the beginning of October and have been inseparable ever since. Machi is the most loyal, happy and supportive person that I have ever met. I admire her unique and determined spirit. We have had many notable adventures together, such as spending Christmas Day hiking a very daunting and beautiful mountain range on a school trip, a dozen 'Dance Dance Revolution' and bubble tea dates, and over 100 lunchtimes of conversations in broken

Japenglish (Japanese and English combined). We are always laughing together and the thought of leaving each other brings tears to both of our eyes every time it's mentioned in conversation. I am thankful for her every day. Machi is just one of the many Japanese and exchange student friendships that I have made here that I know will continue long past the day we say goodbye in person.

The many meaningful friendships that I have developed on exchange have allowed me to realize how much our friends shape who we are and how important it is that we are mindful of who we hang around. A note to future exchange students; our friends shape us for better or for worse and that is even more true on exchange where your circumstances are forcing you to grow so much every day. Think quality over quantity with friendships on exchange. Exchange is a tough journey and if you choose the right friends to take with you on the journey it makes it much more meaningful and fulfilling.

Thank you to everyone in Rotary Districts 2610 and 7080, my four host families in Japan, my family in Canada and all of the other people from all over the world that have supported me on my exchange.

So, here's to the last six months. To the good, the bad, the happy and the sad. Here's to 6 months of growing up in Japan. Cheers to the amazing people that I have met and getting the chance to meet myself a little better. Finally, cheers to the next few months; that they may be as crazy of an adventure as the first few.

さようなら ('Sayonara', meaning 'until we meet again')

*Stephanie*

