



Stephanie

from Burlington
&
Burlington Lakeshore
to
Japan

"I realized as time started flying by faster than I could have ever imagined that my exchange was not defined by the amount of time I spent on it, rather it was defined by how I spent my time."

I am writing this in my room in Canada instead of in Japan, yet as I remember how I had to leave my exchange 2 months early, I do not have an ounce of regret in my heart. This is because the day that I stepped off that plane on August 24th, I told myself that I would live every day in Japan to the fullest, and I believe I did that up until the day I said my teary goodbyes to my friends and family on March 24th, 2020.

My exchange was full of me saying "yes" and "can I go" whether it was a trip to the grocery store or Tokyo. I realized as time started flying by faster than I could have ever imagined that my exchange wasn't defined by the amount of time I spent on it, rather it was defined by how I spent my time. I spent my time in Japan visiting new cities, and exploring the landscapes, I spent my time in class feeling accomplished when I understood a word of the math lesson, I spent my time at the dinner table with my host family, telling jokes in a language that was so foreign to me only a few months earlier and I spent my time with my new friends, laughing, crying and everything in between. I can confidently say that I used up every square second of my time in Japan. Even on the day I left, I spent a few hours seeing the cherry blossoms during my layover in Tokyo with my host Mom and eating at the sushi restaurant that the former Japanese emperor's sushi chef works at.



Now as you read this, I can guarantee your life looks different than it did a few months ago because of the coronavirus pandemic. We suddenly and without warning, all experienced a significant change. For me, this means I speak English instead of Japanese, the weather is cold outside and I am unable to smell tempura cooking downstairs. My change was not easy; significant life changes hardly ever are. Imagine leaving an entirely new life to come back to one where nothing has changed except you; that is what coming back from exchange felt like for me. It takes change management and adapting but as you can see from what's happened over the last few months, humans are very good at adapting to new circumstances.



Since my last BeaverTale, I did many things in Japan. I had an end of year dinner with my school English club. I traveled to a few different and beautiful places in the prefecture with friends. I passed a Japanese language test, bought my very own kimono and I shared many nice meals with my host families and friends. Spring in Japan is extremely beautiful. First, the rose blossoms come out before the cherry blossoms.

Then the cherry blossoms come, with the entire city decorated accordingly. I was lucky enough to see the cherry blossoms bloom in 3 different cities!

One of my favorite memories from March was when my friends and I took a day trip to the city of Takaoka. We explored the downtown area and visited all the major landmarks and tourist spots such as; one of the three Big Buddhas of Japan and, one of the best melon pan places in the region (melon pan is a sweet Japanese bread, it's really good).



Since almost every Japanese city has a castle, we stopped at what once was the castle for a picnic lunch on the grass. It was a beautiful day and we were lucky enough to see some cherry blossoms there too. I remember smelling the cherry blossoms for the first time and being so surprised. They smell nice and look even prettier. We also visited the sea in Takaoka as well which was beautiful. It was a perfect day, in fact it was one of the last days before the pandemic hit hard and everyone's lives were turned upside down.

I think that one thing that is important to get when leaving any big situation is closure. I was so fortunate to be able to have gotten closure in person before I left Japan. For me, it was in the form of writing over 25 thank you notes in Japanese characters (such as the one pictured to the left) at midnight and getting up every day of the last two weeks of my time in Japan at 6am to fit all the goodbyes in (at that point in Japan there were almost no cases of the virus and no stay at home orders). I think I managed to say goodbye to over 100 people those last few weeks. I visited my school for the last time, had a host family goodbye party, cried with my friends when we said our last goodbyes and ran around the city buying souvenirs for my friends and family back home as well as taking pictures at some of my favorite spots in my Japanese city.

Although there's been so much change for me during the last few months, the one thing that has not changed is the relationships I made on exchange. I remember sitting on the plane home, and thinking of what I would miss most from Japan. Much to my surprise, nothing but people's faces came to mind (which is very surprising because Japanese sushi is to die for).



Luckily, those faces are some of the only things I can still see in Canada. I don't think I have gone through one week since coming home without Face-timing at least one of my Japanese host family members or friends. I have even developed a few Japanese pen pals. The time we all have due to the pandemic is a blessing because we are able to talk about things we never could talk about and try out fun games and activities over Facetime. (Pro tip-ukulele jam sessions over Facetime across a few continents are the best way to do it). I have even learned a new Japanese craft called 'mizuhiki' over Facetime with my Japanese friends and practiced my origami skills. (see the photo to the left)

We cannot predict what the future of the Rotary Youth Exchange Program or the future of anything anymore but what I can say is the cheesy quote we hear all too often- that every obstacle is an opportunity. As an example, I was devastated when I got the news I would be returning home from my exchange 2 months early. Back then, it seemed like the end of the world but in hindsight, it was just another great opportunity that my exchange has given me to get out of my comfort zone and grow as a person. C'mon who else can say they got on one of the last flights out of Japan during a global pandemic alone at 18 years old, had to eat prepackaged potato salad sandwiches on a plane and still lived to tell the tale, not many people.



I would also like to say a last big thank you or ありがとうございます to everyone that helped me before, during and after my exchange in Japan. Firstly, to all of the Rotarians in Districts 7080 and 4610 for supporting me throughout my entire exchange whether it was through emails, calls, invitations to try new activities or monetary support. Secondly to my school, 金沢二水高校 for supporting me so much throughout my exchange from the English club all the way to the Nara trip committee.

Thirdly to my friends, both exchange students and Japanese friends and lastly, a big thank you goes out to my families in Canada and in Japan. To my host families; Kamide-san, Anbai-san and Takagi-san, they were all so supportive and gave me the opportunity to experience so much of Japan and the Japanese culture and to my Canadian family, thank you for allowing me to go on exchange, hosting an exchange student and supporting me every step of the way.



I am sad that this is my last BeaverTale, I enjoyed writing about my exchange experience. I tried to always give advice in my reports or teach something because I believe that it is important to write with purpose. I do not know what tomorrow has in store for this exchange program since the world is bound to look and feel so incredibly different after this pandemic. I sincerely hope that Rotary Youth Exchange continues because it no doubt has the potential to change the world, in fact, it's already completely changed mine.



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