

Cait Denight Gayle – Miyagi Prefecture, 1991 – 1993

Tucked away in the northeastern corner of Miyagi Prefecture, Utatsu town (now known as Minamisanriku) sits quietly, nestled between an expansive coastline and the Kitakami Mountains. In this unassuming, quiet fishing and farming village, Cait Denight Gayle would live and work as an Assistant Language Teacher for the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program. When she arrived in the early 90s, Cait embraced her new home and spent two years fully immersed in the seaside community.

Cait grew up on Guam so she was familiar with Japanese mannerisms and food. Despite never having been to Japan, she had traveled to other countries and studied International Relations in college, so she had an open outlook to different perspectives and cultures. Although almost no one spoke English and Cait was the only Western foreigner in the town—indeed, she was often the first foreigner that many of the townsfolk had ever met—her sense of earnestness was palpable; she wanted to be a part of the community and to dive into life in the new country. Her openness was well received, and she was welcomed with enthusiasm.

Looking back on her time in Miyagi, Cait is thankful to have experienced Japan before the distractions of the internet and constant connectivity. Fully immersed in the rural town, her daily life was filled with interactions with the community. She was constantly invited to different homes for dinner, communicating through gestures and simple words as she worked on her Japanese. On some mornings before she taught her elementary or junior high school classes, she would wake up at dawn and help her students tend to their fishing pens, walking to the bay and feeding the salmon before she had breakfast.

Due to her frequent interactions, in time, she got to understand the subtle differences that distinguished the two clear lineages of the farmers and the fishermen. The town's fishermen, despite being from such a small area, occasionally ran in to foreigners during their voyages, and had more exposure to people and perspectives outside of the Japanese sphere. To her, the town's fishermen seemed to live for the moment and were more open to risk and chance—their work paid off in an instance. Although they controlled the parameters available to them, fate had its role to play. Farmers, on the other hand, were more serious. Consistent effort and careful, deliberate actions were rewarded by a prodigious crop. They knew their land well and could do more to create and control an environment that would bring them a bountiful harvest.

Cait enthusiastically threw herself into a wide array of activities in Utatsu. She practiced with the local Japanese drum team several nights a week. Japanese drums, or *taiko*, are frequently featured in performances during festivals, rituals and in modern competitions. Cait traveled with a group of some 20 fellow musicians within the region to compete, carpooling to neighboring villages and occasionally making further overnight journeys. The *Tōhoku* region is famous for giant drums called *gruryo daiko*, so it took extra care and effort to move the massive drums on top of trucks for their trips. Cait, at six feet tall and often the only foreigner within the drum groups, had a wonderful time during their travels, bonding with other musicians and getting to see remote parts of Japan unknown to most foreigners.

Her height also put her at an advantage on the court, and her experience playing basketball growing up lent itself nicely to her joining the town's basketball team. Cait took up badminton as a completely new sport. Although her height had its advantages, in badminton, skill and technique played much larger roles. Similarly, she stood out as the only foreigner during their games with neighboring towns. Understandably, her presence stirred attention and she was a bit of a celebrity. Even through sports, Cait fostered cross-cultural relations and internationalization.

At the same time, Cait continued to immerse herself in learning more about Japanese culture. She took lessons in *ikebana* (flower arranging) and tea ceremony. In studying these classical Japanese arts of refinement, she cultivated an attention to detail and form. Each movement and choice deliberate, there was a meditative quality to her practices. Even after she left Japan, Cait continued to practice and perform tea ceremonies.

Cait had no direct experience as a teacher, but she approached teaching as she did the rest of her life in Japan—with enthusiasm and an all-in attitude! She pulled from her experience as an active student in her formative years. Her college presentation work helped her stay confident in front of a classroom full of kids, and she utilized her experience planning events to help her Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) plan fun and engaging lessons. It helped tremendously that Cait was so active in the community. Her interactions with the kids on the farms and on the beaches helped the students relax around her, making the classroom environment less intimidating.

Many JET Program participants also take a role in providing English lessons and international events for the larger community. Cait hosted a class that brought in all types of people from the community, ranging in ages from 20 to 80. Some participants had traveled and were conversational, while others had very little English ability or exposure. Cait managed to bring them all together by organizing engaging events involving cooking, different holiday-themed celebrations, singing, or fun presentations about hobbies or travel. Even with linguistic limitations, Cait fostered international understanding and offered a peek into global cultures and perspectives, one that she hoped would inspire the community to learn more about the world beyond Japan's borders. Additionally, Cait organized international events targeted at bringing the outside community in. She invited Japanese nationals from neighboring towns as well as foreigners—including students from the University of Sendai and other JETs—to come and experience Utatsu. She worked closely with the local government to showcase the town's culture and way of life, hosting events like pottery making or a chance to venture out on Utatsu's fishing boats.

Cait's deep impression on the Utatsu community culminated in her being asked to be the keynote speaker during the Coming of Age Day, or *Seijin no Hi*. The celebration in January commemorates all the young adults in the community who have reached or will reach their 20th birthday—considered the age of maturity—between the previous year and April 1 of the current year. She was honored, but it was also nerve-wracking—she had to make the speech

entirely in Japanese! With the help one of her key contacts and friends in the town, a retired principal who could speak English, she wrote her speech and practiced diligently for weeks. The important ceremony was well attended, drawing in nearly the entire population of Utatsu.

She spoke about the interconnectedness of their small town with the world. Even as the budding adults ventured out to discover themselves, traveling to new places and growing through different experiences, they still had this deep connection with Utatsu. They could come back, bringing their experiences and new perspectives with them to help their home town and community members grow. The topic seemed fitting for Cait, who deeply understood the profound benefits she experienced immersed in the town; cross-cultural perspectives ran both ways. It was through her full embrace of the community and life in Utatsu that she was able to make her speech at all. She went from having no Japanese language abilities to making a 15-minute speech entirely in Japanese. She did not shy away from the unknown; she leaned in.

Cait completed the JET Program in 1993, but the depth of her connections created a significant, indelible impact on her. She kept in touch with many of her friends in Utatsu and flew back four years later to personally invite her friends and community class members to her wedding on Guam. A group of 15 to 20 people made the trip to the island, including the mayor, the head of her school and the local priest! Only one of the travelers had ever been to Guam before and for many, it was their first international experience.

Since she left Utatsu, Cait has traveled to Japan often and has taken her family there about five times already. Currently, one of her sons is attending Temple University in Tokyo. The culture matches well with his personality and he's enjoying his time as a student. Cait wonders if he'll follow in her footsteps and apply for the JET Program once he graduates---actually, she wonders if all her children will be future JETs!

For Cait, it is clear that her willingness to fully experience life in Japan resulted in the richness of her experience in Utatsu and the depth of her connection with the town. Once she showed her desire and interest in becoming a full member of her community, they took her in, embracing her as one of their own. Show up, in all openness and earnestness, and you will reap the rewards.