

## **Edward M. Wallace – Hidaka-Cho, Hokkaido Prefecture, 1996 – 1998**

In the fourth grade, when Edward's parents decided to move from Ohio to Michigan, all he could think about was how he would make friends in a totally new state. As he waited to meet his new principal on the first day of school, he saw another new kid waiting his turn—perhaps, he thought, they could be friends? The new student turned out to be from South Korea. They were in the same class and did end up becoming friends. For Edward, this would mark the start of his curiosity about the world beyond the Midwest. Eventually, it would lead him to decades of adventure halfway around the world.

Edward M. Wallace had grown up in a very culturally American household. It was not until he stepped into his South Korean friend's house that he got a look into the world outside of the United States. He tried South Korean food and learned a bit about their culture. In high school, he became friends with foreign exchange students, further whetting his appetite for what else the world had in store. He studied music in college, but managed to integrate his international curiosity through certain courses. For instance, he studied foreign music and society in his ethnomusicology class. He was drawn to learning about other cultures and set his sights on studying abroad. Edward spent months convincing his parents to let him go to Zimbabwe for a semester, but he unexpectedly received a competitive scholarship to study for a year in Eastern China, so it took another month to convince his parents to let him go to there, instead!

Edward stayed in a dormitory with other international students, but there weren't many westerners on the course. He was usually the only American. There were a few European students, but a large majority of his classmates were from Japan. Oddly enough, it was in China that Edward first made Japanese friends and was introduced to Japanese culture. Edward's best friend's brother happened to be living in Japan at the time, working as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in Ibaraki Prefecture. Edward visited him and he really enjoyed his time there. After learning that he, too, could apply to the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program after he earned his Bachelor's degree, Edward set his sights on becoming an ALT.

On the part of the application that asked about placement requests within Japan, Edward was one of the very few people who asked for Hokkaido—the northernmost main island of Japan, well known for its incredible ski slopes and intense winters. Edward had some allergies to mold and wanted to be in a rural area so that he would be forced to learn the language, so he figured, why not? His placement in Hidaka-cho, Hokkaido, certainly fit the bill for rural; the town had a population of 2,400. Hidaka-cho lies in the Hidaka Mountains at a cross road leading to Sapporo and Furano, both larger cities and tourist destinations.

Living in Hokkaido is a different experience from the rest of Japan. Indeed, even many of the Japanese people outside of the prefecture were curious about what life was like in Hokkaido. Edward always imagined Japan having ancient temples and buildings, but in Hokkaido, buildings are relatively modern due to the pressures of the extreme weather conditions. He was no stranger to the cold—he did grow up in the Midwest after all—but what struck him was the duration of the winters. It seemed to him that winter lasted for nearly half the year. Snow

would pile up so high on either side of the road that it felt like driving through a maze. On the roadsides, walls of snow would dwarf the cars passing through.

His work set up was also atypical from his fellow ALTs. As is the case with most rural areas in Japan, the population—especially the younger generation—was dwindling. As a way to counteract their shrinking school size, the board of education shifted their high school to specifically focus on kids who wanted to be skiing or sports instructors. They advertised in the back of ski and sports magazines and young boys and girls flew to Hidaka-cho to engage in vocational-style training. Mornings featured sports curriculum and the evenings included more traditional high school classroom sessions. There were only two local high school students that joined in for school at night, and this is when Edward would teach some of his English classes.

Outside of the classroom, Edward spent a lot of time teaching *eikaiwa*, English conversation classes. Whereas most JETs teach perhaps one community English class a week, he had four: two levels for women, a general class and one for students. English instruction within the school system is always done through team teaching—the ALT supports the Japanese Teachers of English, or JTEs. In *eikaiwa* classes, however, the ALT is the lead and typically teaches solo, so there is more freedom to decide on the curriculum and topics. It was unique as well that his ladies' English classes would always be back to back, with a 10-minute overlap between the sessions when everyone would have tea and snacks together. Later Edward would discover that many of the ladies were from the same household or worked in the same shop. This way, the students could all take classes—a shift system, so to speak.

Edward didn't have much teaching experience before he came to Japan, but thankfully, his ALT predecessors left copies of their lesson plans and activities. This was a time before the internet so these resources—along with a similarly ad hoc published book of game ideas put together by the Hokkaido association of JETs—were an absolute lifeline!

Of all his activities and games, however, Edward's enjoyed his incorporation of music into lessons the most. He didn't perform for his students often, but usually would incorporate a song per lesson in some way. He would use a song as a fun way to demonstrate different tenses in English, or if there were vocabulary words centered around a certain theme. Edward both introduced new songs as well as capitalized on the popularity of certain artists in Japan. For instance, Bobby Caldwell, the American singer and songwriter best known hit single "What You Won't Do for Love" was not a very popular artist in the US, but was popular enough in Japan to be nicknamed "Mister AOR" (AOR stood for "Adult Oriented Rock"—or adult contemporary). One of his big hits in Japan, Heart of Mine, had lyrics that focused on time—always, never, sometimes, forever, hands of time—so it was a great way to get his students engaged while learning all about time and its associated vocabulary. Once he did a blues lesson with students and got them to write a simple 3-line blues stanza. In the end, Edward played the guitar and sang their made-up lyrics. Bringing his love for music to the classroom made lessons personal and engaging.

At the end of his second year as a JET, Edward knew he was ready for a change, but didn't know what to do. He had a friend living in Tokyo, someone he had met through a friend while studying in China, who had an unusual job: finding extras for operas performing in Japan. It made sense for big opera companies from Europe to bring their own orchestra, choir and soloists, but operas were huge productions and it was cost-prohibitive to bring everyone over. His friend was always on the lookout to hire European-looking extras for the stage. Edward had not been a big opera fan, but it sounded interesting, so he moved to Tokyo.

Edward was an extra for several years with both European traveling and Japanese operas—the tradition originating in Europe, Japanese companies also liked having western-looking extras. He almost always played a priest, soldier or a peasant. He danced here and there, but didn't sing. The productions were incredible and at times he would be on stage with a hundred people at once! It was a thrill to be the massive halls in front huge audiences. Standing next to world-class opera soloists, Edward could not help but be moved by their power and skill. He would travel within Japan with the operas as well, to other cities in Yokohama and Kansai. Many of the European opera companies would come back to Japan every few years, so he made some great friends. Years later, Edward would also take on the role of finding extras for the opera.

The extra job paid decently enough that he could live in Tokyo, but in order to get a working visa, he taught English during the day. Drawing from his experience in Hidaka-cho, he taught at a small family *eikaiwa* for a year and later taught English at a special school for kids aspiring to become Broadway performers. Eventually he landed a more lucrative job of doing intensive English courses for a precious metals company. He would travel to remote places and teach engineers for 2-3 days. The work was very interesting, but it was also more demanding than his previous roles. During these visits, his boss would sit in on the 7-hour classes and take notes, providing Edward with critiques after each class. Although it was certainly nerve racking, the critiques made him a better and more disciplined instructor. For the last seven years in Japan, he taught English at Yokohama University, a branch of Temple University.

Music continued to play a big part in Edward's life. He studied traditional Japanese instruments like the shamisen and flute, and organized small community concerts featuring world music. He met his wife in Tokyo and together they did a lot of music volunteering. They got into music therapy and volunteered at retirement centers and hospitals for severely physically and mentally impaired patients. When his wife was pregnant with their son, they learned about the benefits of rhythm and music for the development of young children. The Japanese health care system provides excellent support for new moms, forming "mama's groups" so new moms can support each other. After the birth of their son, Edward and his wife also performed for the local mama's groups.

After 15 years in Japan, Edward felt like it was time for a change. In Tokyo, he had met a person from Guam and moved to the island with his family in 2010. He worked in the non-profit and tourism sectors for a few years, but Edward eventually realized that he was still drawn to teaching. In 2016, he started teaching English at the Japanese School of Guam. Whereas in

Japan, he taught mostly older kids, college students and adults, he now teaches younger children.

Edward looks back and acknowledges that life in the tiny town in Hokkaido wasn't always easy. Winters felt so long and he sometimes felt isolated as the only foreigner—and one of the few people his age—where he lived. However, he learned a lot from the experience and it got him to where he is today. It started his career in education, something he never expected to do, and propelled him into a whirlwind of interesting experiences that allowed him to cross paths with so many fascinating people along the way. He wouldn't be where he is today, with his wife and son, teaching English on this remote island in the Pacific, had he not been open to exploring the world beyond the Midwest. He says that new experiences can absolutely be scary and daunting, but they can also lead to incredible adventures.