

Kristina Flores Wilson Manibusan – Tsushima, Nagasaki Prefecture 2000 – 2002

At first, Kristina was shocked when she found out about her placement in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. Her step-grandmother lived in Tokyo and she had requested to be placed close enough to visit regularly. Instead, Kristina was placed about as far away from Tokyo as possible: on a tiny island between the coast of the Kyushu, one of the main islands of Japan, and Busan, South Korea. She hardly could've imagined a more remote posting. However, after the initial shock and confusion wore off, Kristina instead took an attitude of curiosity and openness. Who knows what the island held in store for her?

Growing up on Guam with a Japanese stepmother, Kristina Flores Wilson Manibusan was familiar with Japanese culture. Kristina's classmates would fawn over her neatly packed *bento* boxes, full of delicious meals in adorable presentation. Family trips to Japan were commonplace, whether they involved visiting family or touring the sites of the country. She even took a school trip to Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto one year.

Kristina also studied Japanese for several years as a student at St. John's and continued to take classes at the University of Oregon. She majored in environmental studies, but as she entered her senior year, she was pleasantly surprised to find that she was also very close to completing a double major in Japanese. It was logical to follow it through to getting a diploma; she had been studying the language for so long by then. Through a family connection, she also worked in Tokyo at a boutique clothing company for a summer during college and did a semester abroad in the city during her senior year.

After graduating, Kristina taught at St. John's briefly before returning to Oregon to work in a pre-school. She got her master's degree in early childhood education a few years later. Throughout this time, Kristina still felt drawn to living in Japan. Her Japanese studies and shorter stays in Tokyo helped improve her Japanese, but she still felt that she had further to go linguistically. The JET Program was a natural fit to her language pursuits and passion for education.

Kristina's placement to Tsushima, a small island off the coast of Kyushu, was still a bit of a mystery when she arrived. But at the airport, as her greeters excitedly showed her the plaque indicating that Guam and Tsushima were sister islands, all was clear! Tsushima is a mountainous island largely covered with forest with a large protective bay in the center. It is home to beautiful shrines, crystal clear waters and breathtaking natural beauty. Kristina's would be living in Toyotama, a picturesque town set in one of the middle bays of Tsushima.

Living in the quaint town, Kristina instantly appreciated the contrast to her time as an exchange student in Tokyo—in many ways, this felt more like 'real' Japan. She was taken by how welcoming and warm the villagers were. Although the rural town was not wealthy by any means and many of the residents worked hard on both on land and at sea—the area was known for shiitake mushrooms, squid fishing and pearl harvesting—they were extremely

generous and kind. The anonymity of a big city like Tokyo gave way to the full embrace of this tiny island community and she felt at home.

In the city, it was also harder to practice Japanese. Many things, such as signs and menus, are made to accommodate international visitors. City dwellers often wanted to practice their English with foreigners. Kristina specifically wanted to strengthen her conversational skills and Toyotama proved to be just the right setting. Kristina's day-to-day life was full of opportunities to practice—hardly anyone spoke English! The one thing she hadn't anticipated was that this region of Japan had its own slang and dialect. Initially when she told the townsfolk that she was proficient in Japanese, they looked at her with incredulity. She was surprised by how the different pronunciations and nuances affected her ability to communicate. She stuck with it, though, and in about six months, she had an excellent grasp of the regional variation. Kristina's abilities continued to flourish over the course of her two years there.

Typically, in the English classroom, the Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) have the formal training in education, so they take the reins when it comes to overall structure and other pedagogical details. JETs in Kristina's position as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) focus more on activities, games, engaging the students and, of course, authenticity. There is no requirement that ALTs speak Japanese or have a teaching degree—only a Bachelor's degree of some type is required—but it is certainly an asset to have both skills. Kristina could understand the approach of her JTEs and communicate with them in both English and Japanese.

Although she was technically based primarily at one of the junior high schools, Kristina really taught at all the schools within her town. Her schedule had her rotating through another junior high school and the senior high school. The highlight of her teaching, however, was always visiting with the five elementary schools in the afternoons. They welcomed her with such enthusiasm. Since she split her time amongst several schools, each of her visits were treated as special and the whole school gathered to play her English games and activities. She felt like a local celebrity every time she stepped foot in front of the kids.

JETs initially sign on for one-year contracts, but they are able to renew for a total of up to five years. Soon after she arrived, Kristina met Rebecca, a neighboring second-year JET from the UK and the two became fast friends. Rebecca showed Kristina around the island and helped her settle in, sharing her insight about life on Tsushima. They explored the island together and carpooled to attend martial arts classes in a southern part of the island. Rebecca spent her first year setting up English lessons and cooking classes for her town and highly encouraged Kristina to be proactive in the community. Kristina followed suit and the pair even created an eight-week international cooking course jointly for their communities. One night it was Thai food, the next week, Italian, then on to Indian! It was a really fun way to get to know the community members they normally wouldn't have much interaction with—it was often the moms of their students who attended.

Although Kristina had traveled to Japan many times growing up, she had never explored the southern part of country. During her time as a JET, Kristina visited Fukuoka prefecture often,

getting there was only four hours by ferry or 30 minutes by plane. It was interesting to explore the different vibe of Fukuoka city and getting there served as a gateway to other prefectures like Kumamoto, known for its famous natural hot springs. Add less than two hours to her trip to Fukuoka and Kristina could visit the islands of Okinawa to go diving with manta rays. It also only took a little over an hour by jet ferry to get to Busan, South Korea, so Kristina often went there for weekend getaways. Once, she went to the Philippines with a group of JETs on a humanitarian trip. It was an incredible experience to be able to work with her fellow JETs to give back by building houses for Habitat for Humanity. Her time as a JET was a great opportunity to travel to parts of Japan and the region that she may never have thought to visit otherwise.

Of course, Kristina also flew back to Guam to visit her family. On one trip home, Kristina noticed an article in the paper indicating that the Guam Football Association had World Cup tickets to the games in Seoul. Kristina was no football fan—that's soccer to Americans—but she mentioned it to Rebecca and her other British JET friends and they were ecstatic. Kristina scooped up some tickets and that year, she took the ferry to Busan with three British JETs and took a quick flight to Seoul. They got seats to the opening ceremonies and watched three games. Although Kristina didn't know anything about soccer, being in the charged-up environment with three very enthusiastic Brits made for a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Today, Kristina continues to follow her passion for early childhood education and teaches kinder for DoDEA. Her teaching degree combined with her experience teaching such a variety of students in Toyotama helped her gain confidence leading a classroom. She sometimes takes direct inspiration in her classes on Guam from her time teaching as an ALT, using games that she recalled children playing during recess or activities she did in the classrooms of Toyotama.

Even with her clear skills of Japanese and degree in education before entering the JET Program, above all else, Kristina thinks that her sense of openness to adventure and the unknown was the single-most important factor to making the most of her time as a JET. From that very first news of her placement to a remote island far removed from Tokyo, her maturity and willingness to adapt to new situations was key to having a great experience and getting the full benefit of living in a new country. She was open to learning and growing, to not only do her part as a JET, bringing in her language and culture, but to be just as receptive to what she was exposed to, be it from her JETs, community members or JETs from abroad.