

Shirley Aydlett – Shizuoka City, 2003-2008

Shirley signed on for the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program with the intention of staying in Japan for two years. She had grown up relatively sheltered in a traditional Filipino farming family and could count the number of times she had been off island in one hand. She figured that it'd be a great opportunity to try something a little different, to be immersed in a foreign culture, and then come back to her normal life on Guam. What she hadn't anticipated was that she would end up staying for five years, the maximum number of years for a JET participant. In that time, her experiences in Japan would fundamentally change her forever. As a JET, Shirley grew by leaps and bounds, becoming a more confident, resilient and adventurous person than she could've ever imagined.

The exact nature of one's work as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) can vary quite dramatically from one person to another. Although JETs are recruited through one centralized process, they are technically employed by local governments at the prefectural or city level. In Shirley's case, she would teach exclusively at a single junior high or elementary school for 3-4 months at a time and then move to a new school within Shizuoka City.

Shirley had taught at a junior high school on Guam for a year before she came to Japan, but she faced a unique challenge with her rotational position. Back home, she had a full school year to get to know her students and get them comfortable with her in the classroom. Now, with a compressed timeline and students who were even shyer considering that she was a foreign teacher, how could she break the ice and get her students excited to learn English?

The answer came from an unlikely source: volleyball. Japanese students choose one after school club to commit to for their term in junior high, which can range from sports to cultural focuses, like English or calligraphy. School clubs in Japan are typically a big commitment, with practices running for two hours or more after classes daily, sometimes with extra practices before school starts and on the weekends. Shirley had played volleyball as a student so she started attending the club practices. Initially the students were still shy around her, but they slowly started to loosen up as she continued to attend practices. She taught them how to spike the ball with their non-dominant hand and this brought Shirley a certain level of fame within the team. In a mix of English, Japanese and a heavy dose of physical miming, they started to joke around with her.

Shirley genuinely loved to attend the practices and went every day, eventually assisting the coach with the team. She attended weekend tournaments in other parts of the prefecture and was their loudest supporter as she watched from the stands.

She began to notice that the students in the volleyball club were doing better in her classes. They were more comfortable and outspoken, willing to raise their hand in class and enthusiastically engage in her lessons. Gradually Shirley's reputation spread beyond the club level and she earned the respect and admiration of more students. She came into the school with a compressed

window and extra challenges, but ended up forming really strong bonds with her students. When the time came to leave the school, the team presented her with roses and gifts. It was a tearful goodbye, but Shirley learned a lot in the process.

As she moved onto new schools, she had no time to be shy or introverted. Instead, she immersed herself in school clubs right away. Sometimes schools would not have a volleyball team, so she would try out a totally new sport that she hadn't played before, or join in on cultural clubs. Picking green tea leaves and learning how to do a green tea ceremony? Why not! It was like a fresh start every few months, a way to try something out of the ordinary. With a few school rotations under her belt, Shirley got really comfortable diving into the new and unknown.

A couple of months into her teaching career in Japan, Shirley faced yet another challenge that she hadn't fully understood when signing up as a JET: winter. Growing up on a small tropical island for all of her life, she really had no idea what to expect. Winters in Shizuoka are mild by most standards, but Shirley was ill prepared. Seeing snow for the first time was novel and fun, but she quickly learned that her jeans would not cut it in the wind chill. She admittedly hated the cold!

So you can imagine her hesitation when a fellow ALT from Nebraska invited her to go snowboarding. Shirley couldn't fathom why people would actually *want* to go out in the bitter cold! It took more than a little coaxing (and a trip to buy thermals), but she agreed. They packed up her tiny car and drove to the nearest mountain. Since she had no experience surfing or skateboarding, Shirley was surprised at how quickly she learned to snowboard. Her friend taught her the ropes and by the end of the day she felt comfortable on the slopes. She didn't like snowboarding—no, she loved it! The adrenaline rush of gliding down the manicured mountains surrounded by picturesque nature represented a freedom and adventure that Shirley hadn't really experienced growing up.

In a short span of time, she became a snowboard addict. She bought all the gear and made it a point to visit Nagano as often as she could during the winter season. Nagano, which hosted the Winter Olympics in 1998, boasts a slew of pristine mountains and is considered one of Japan's premier ski destinations. She loved the sport so much that she would pile in her car with friends and make a six-hour journey just to snowboard for a few hours then drive back for another six hours! Years later when she got married, Shirley didn't opt for a luxury vacation to Europe for her honeymoon; she took her new husband snowboarding in Hokkaido during the annual Sapporo Ice Festival. Once an island girl with a tremendous aversion to the cold, now an adventure junkie seeking out the coldest part of Japan in the depths of winter!

So much of Shirley's experience in Japan cannot be summed up in her physical endeavors, but in a way, they represented so many larger changes in her life. She went from being a girl with a very humble, sheltered upbringing to someone who actively faced new situations and challenges with a positive attitude. Her time as a JET was all about stepping out of her normal life and foraying into the

unknown. In the process she grew so much more confident and really developed as a person.

To this day, Shirley still maintains strong connections with Shizuoka. She visits every two years and this month she's visiting the city with her husband and baby boy for the first time. Shirley never forgets her roots on Guam, but her time as a JET in Shizuoka was so formative in her personal development that she calls Shizuoka her second home.