

JET Interview – Leslie Reynolds (Niigata 2005-2007)

As Leslie's bus from Tokyo made its way to the small seaside city of Kashiwazaki in the summer of 2005, she had very little idea of what to expect from her life in Japan. Located on the Japan Sea side of Niigata prefecture in Honshu, the sandy beaches looked familiar to Leslie, who grew up on Guam, but this was certainly not the Pacific Ocean that she knew. Away from her tropical island upbringing, how would life be in a foreign country? Would she be able to manage with her limited Japanese language skills? How would she manage a classroom full of students? So many questions raced through Leslie's mind before she even set foot in her new home.

After Leslie graduated with her degree in English, she wasn't sure what to do next. She held down different jobs in retail, restaurants and even briefly with an airline, but felt aimless about what to pursue. She'd known about the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program while growing up on Guam so, she thought, why not?

Leslie's new life in rural Japan proved to have its own challenges, with language being the biggest factor. Compared to big cities like Tokyo or Osaka, residents in the countryside typically do not speak much English. Leslie had some basic Japanese education in high school, but now she was fully immersed. Elements that she had taken for granted, the everyday tasks like going to the bank or picking up groceries, proved to be new challenges. Navigating the bus schedule and deciphering how and when to take out her trash—all of it required a new level of concentration. Fortunately, she had her fellow JETs and Board of Education supervisor to ask, as well as a friendly community around her. She managed through a combination of gestures and limited Japanese. Things got easier with experience, but it did teach her to appreciate how easy things are when the language barrier isn't a factor!

Teaching proved to be another challenge for Leslie. She was assigned to be an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) at two junior high schools and five elementary schools, rotating her weeks at each location. She had never taught before, so stepping into the classroom for the first time was a bit nerve-wracking. With some guidance from her Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs), the head teacher in the classroom, she was able to manage at first, but she lacked confidence in her abilities.

Fortunately, there were JETs in the area who had been teaching for a few years and were enthusiastic about sharing what they'd learned. A few foreign nationals who maxed out their tenure with the JET program—at the time, three years—also stayed in Niigata teaching through private contracts. Together, the JET alumni and existing ALTs coordinated a rotating observation day. As a group, they would go on a working 'fieldtrip' to observe each other live in the classroom, taking turns observing and demonstrating over the course of several months. After the class, the ALTs and JET alumni would get together to discuss different teaching points and leave with concrete ways to improve their own methods. Having other experienced teachers observe her was terrifying for an

inexperienced educator like Leslie, but the results were worth the effort; she learned a tremendous amount and it helped shape her teaching style and approach.

As her two years as a JET ended, learning from more experienced educators in the JET Program fueled her desire to gain more professional development in the field. Leslie enrolled in a graduate program in Second Language Studies at the University of Hawaii in Manoa. As part of her course practicum, she spent a month teaching at the university level in rural Thailand and made her way back to Japan three times, teaching at Kyoto Women's University for two weeks over summers. Both were wonderful opportunities for her to travel and this time, to have the background theory to direct her lessons.

Leslie moved back to Guam after Hawaii and her teaching career continued in the English Department at the University of Guam where she taught introductory classes. Eventually, she craved a smaller class size, so she transitioned to teach at an English Language Institute. Her familiarity with Japanese culture and a teacher-centered school setting, similar to her time as a JET, proved useful in her new role.

Through her master's program, Leslie gained the confidence to command a classroom and develop its curriculum, but she says that there were some lessons she wouldn't have learned without being an ALT with the JET Program. The difficulty she faced while trying to accomplish mundane daily tasks in Japan gave her valuable perspective into the challenges that many of her students face. Having that first-hand experience herself, she developed compassion, understanding all too well how tough "simple" tasks can be when they're enshrouded in a foreign language. Short trips to foreign countries provide some perspective, but exposure to day-to-day challenges for months or years makes a truly lasting impact. Now Leslie believes that everyone should experience living in a foreign country at some point in their lives!

Looking back on it now, Leslie is still surprised at the teaching path that the JET Program carved out for her. She left for Niigata in 2005 with a bit of wanderlust and a lack of direction, but by being open to new experiences and embracing her curiosity, it led to years of professional development and experience in a field she didn't even know she was interested in! The road less traveled teaches us a lot along the way.