

Rose Nicdao – Fukuoka 2006-2011

As Rose arrived in Kitakyushu in 2006, she felt a surge of excitement. It had always been her dream to live and work in Japan, so starting her role as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) with the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program was literally a dream come true.

Armed with a degree in Secondary Education from the University of Guam, and a double major in Japanese studies, she was well prepared to take on the job. Owing in part to her excellent credentials, Rose was placed in a Senior High School with a segment of students on a path dedicated to intensive English study. Unlike most other ALT posts, there were two ALTs based out of her high school. Of about 950 students at the school, roughly 120 were on the English path.

Rose took full advantage of time at the school, getting heavily involved with classroom activities and extracurriculars. She made it a point to engage students in English conversations outside of traditional classroom hours and even pitched in to help during *gakko soji*, a regularly scheduled time every day during which students would clean their classrooms and school grounds. Even during the winter school holidays, Rose came to the high school to participate in ‘winter training’, joining the kids as they did running workouts and cheering on students as they practiced *judo* and *kyudo*, Japanese martial arts. There was no shortage of active pursuits throughout the year, from 5ks and the ‘summer walk’, a 25-kilometer walk that the entire school made as a single group, to field trips that took the students up nearby winding mountains. Rose put in the time and effort to get to know the kids, so the students warmed to her quickly.

Similarly, in the teachers’ room, Rose made a sincere effort at getting to know her fellow educators. She practiced her Japanese with the teachers of non-English subjects and even went out of her way to speak with teachers who only taught at the school intermittently. Her Japanese improved as a result, and she integrated deeply into the school community.

In Japan, senior high school is comprised of three years, grades ten through twelve. The eleventh grade students had the highest level of English ability apart from the twelfth grade students, who were occupied with studying for their college entrance exams. As such, eleventh graders had the most intensive English curriculum. At Rose’s school, every year they had to perform a full-length English play to showcase at the school’s cultural festival. The production was quite involved, with a PowerPoint presentation projected on the wall behind the students as they acted. Each English line was translated above them in Japanese so that the audience could follow along. Imagine performing hour-long plays like *The Sound of Music* entirely in another language! Rose spent many long afternoons helping the students prepare, coaching them on their delivery and pronunciation.

From all the eleventh grade classes, top English speakers were also selected to compete in an annual debate amongst schools in the area. The debates were structured so that each ‘pro’ and ‘con’ side of a topic could make their prepared presentations. In a two-minute time window after hearing the opposing sides,

students would then have to prepare to refute their opponents points, before concluding with their closing remarks. Topics of debate included decreasing the legal age of adults in Japan from 20 to 18, policies toward allowing foreign workers in Japan, and if all English in Japanese schools should be taught entirely by native speakers.

The debates were challenging because they demanded high levels of comprehension, public speaking skills, quick translation and critical thinking. Students would work in teams of three during each debate. They researched the topics and spent hours writing and revising their speeches. The students had to have an excellent grasp of the topics so that they could rebut their opponent's points with minimal preparation on the stage. Rose spent countless hours with the teams each year. In the 1-2 months leading up to the competition, she often stayed at school until 8PM. Rose concurrently had to spruce up their English skills while pushing the students into the uncomfortable, confrontational positions that she knew they would experience on the debate stage. Emotions flared at times, but in the end, the students thanked Rose for taking them to their edges so that they could be better prepared and more resilient.

Rose coached the debate teams for all five years of her time as a JET. In 2007, she was invited to be a judge for the regional competition for the All Kyushu Senior High School Debate Contest, which was held in Fukuoka. Three years later, Rose would return to the regional competition once again, but this time with her students as competitors. They had won the prefectural debate contest--all their late nights of practice paid off.

They didn't make it through to the All Japan Debate Tournament, but they still had a great time. The students discussed the other debates and learned some new techniques and approaches. It was an all-female team that had represented in the All Kyushu Contest and Rose could see that the girls were in their element. Through the challenging process of their preparations and competitions, the girls grew more confident, empowered in their voices and abilities.

Rose maxed out her contract renewals with the JET Program, staying for the full five years. Truth be told, she didn't want to leave, and her school also wanted her to stay. However, she knew her time in Japan would come to an end eventually. She also had some familial obligations to attend to back on Guam. Back on island, she got a job teaching at Notre Dame High School, where she continues to teach today. Rose still stays in touch with her friends from Japan, happily showing them around the island when they come to visit. Japan still plays a role in her life and she visits when she can. A few years after her return, Rose chaperoned a group of students to Karuizawa in Nagano Prefecture on an exchange sponsored by Rotary International. She continues to be involved with the JET Program through the local Japanese consulate and is currently working with them to start a JET alumni association.

Speaking with Rose, it's easy to tell that her time in Japan was meaningful and deeply significant. She forged strong connections with her students, fellow teachers and community. She took advantage of every moment, savoring the adventure of living out her dream of living and working in Japan.