

Farewell Speech to Kokusai

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I am an ALT on the JET program. The JET program was created by the Japanese government over 30 years ago. Their goal was to bring young people from around the world to assist in teaching at public schools. The "e" in JET does not stand for "English". It stands for "exchange". The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program. The real goal of an ALT on the JET program is to promote cultural exchange with not only other students, but teachers, parents, and community members.

Around 2011, the government was debating cancelling this program. Student's national test scores in English were not increasing, and teacher's test scores in TOIEC were also not increasing. The government sponsors about 5000 JETs each year. It was a lot of money, but seemed to have very little benefit.

And then, in March of 2011, the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami happened. To the surprise of many, some of the first people to respond were alumni of the JET program. People who were once ALTs had gone home to get jobs in government, NGOs, international companies, and so on. They immediately reached out during this disaster to provide language support, community support, and volunteers. Even today, alumni associations around the world continue to host efforts to support communities in the Tohoku region, as well as other exchange programs in other local areas.

Because of this response by JET alumni, the Japanese government realized the true benefit of the JET program. While having a native speaker in the classroom was not a solution for improving English, it had created a world-wide community of people who cared about Japan.

In international relations, we call this **soft power**.

More than anything else, this soft power had benefited Japan, because there was now a network of people around the world who understood their culture. And for many of these people, they feel like Japan is a second home.

However, not everyone leaves feeling that way. There are many people who leave feeling hurt, abandoned, and disappointed by a country they once admired and loved. Although they came with hopes of building friendships and exchanging their culture, they were met with walls of silence and ignored. Forever the foreigner, the outsider - and never an equal member of their schools or communities.

I, too, almost left Japan feeling this way.

I knew about the JET program for three years in university, and doing this job was my dream for many years. I failed the first application process, and had to wait another two years to apply. I had to spend so much money and time to travel to my embassy several times, 4

hours away from my home. Then, I was accepted to a wait list! Maybe I would be sent, but maybe not. Finally, after 5 years of studying, waiting, and working, I received my notice:

Congratulations, you have been accepted as an ALT on the JET Program.

There are no words to describe how happy I was. Finally, my dreams of going abroad were coming true. I couldn't wait to meet new people and experience a new culture.

Unfortunately, I learned very quickly that the real situation was very different.

While the Japanese government may know and value the soft power of JETs, many people on the local level, including students and teachers, do not. In fact, most people don't even know how we get here. They don't know how competitive the program is, or the seminars we hear before arriving, or the promises we are told.

When I arrived at my first school, I was only one of two foreigners in the whole town. Almost all of the teachers at my school lived in different towns, and they didn't want to hang out. Not only that, but the first English teacher I worked with couldn't even tell me what lessons to plan. He said, "The other ALT did everything. You do it." With no notes, no guidance, and no community, I felt stressed, panicked, and completely alone. No one wanted to exchange anything with me, and sometimes I felt they didn't even remember that I was there.

The Japan of my dreams was shattered. This place I had dreamed of learning so much from was becoming a nightmare. During those first years, I felt at times disrespected, discriminated, and ignored. Sometimes because I was foreign, sometimes because I was a woman, and sometimes because I was young. I was constantly being put in the middle of principle who wanted more English at the school and a staff and student body who didn't.

If it were not for my husband, I would have left. My mental health was decreasing, and my pride and self-respect were more important than any cultural exchange. No matter what, I could not stay there.

Fortunately, I was allowed to transfer and came to Kokusai. And at Kokusai, I was given a second opportunity to love Japanese people and Japanese culture again.

Even though there have been challenges here, ultimately I found happiness and peace. Japan is just like any other country. It has its wonderful points and its awful points. Some people are warm and welcoming, and some people are not. But I often think about how lucky I was to be put here. Kokusai is still a school that understands better how difficult it can be to move to another country and leave your family, friends, and language behind. Unfortunately, thanks to our ALT network, I know that there are others in Japan right now who are not having similar experiences to me.

I'm not telling you this to make you feel bad. I'm not telling you because I'm bitter. I'm telling you, because I think you do not know it. It can be very difficult to see the impact we have on other people. Small actions, repeated again and again, can leave trauma and pain.

But small actions of kindness, repeated again and again, can create friendships that last forever.

At Kokusai, at least, I have finally been able to achieve my goals of cultural exchange and teaching. Especially, I hope I could be a good role model for young women, to inspire you to be leaders and independent. I hope I showed you the value of working hard and challenging yourself. I hope I showed you that learning can be fun and can give you confidence. But most importantly, I hope I showed you that while I may be an ALT, and a foreigner, I am also a person who wants to be part of your community.

As my final act as an ALT, I invite all of you to be active in this cultural exchange process. Yesterday may have happened, but today is a new day. You may never see how your words and actions affect someone in the future. But as long as you act with an open heart and an open mind, together we can create a soft power that will build a better global community. I will continue to care about Japan, and I hope that you will care about my home and culture. You don't need to know English and you don't need to study culture to do that. The changes we always talk about at Kokusai are right here, in front of us now.

You have two lovely ALTs who would still love to get know all of you - teachers and students - more and more. And you have two new ALTs coming who are excited to build friendships with you. I encourage all of you to do your part in this exchange - to try, more than just once, to welcome them and show them how to be equal members of your community. Cultural exchange can be difficult and confusing, but if you keep trying, there are wonderful friends waiting for you on the other side.

I hope that, if you ever need help, you will call me. All of you are welcome to reach out anytime, anywhere. I will continue to promote exchange and communication, and all of you are welcome to join me in that effort. There are no goodbyes here.

Thank you.

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