



Serena Lai, making rope in Misasa Town

The JET Program

A small group of participants begin the JET program at the start of the Japanese school year. In mid-April a slightly nervous **Serena Lai** left for Sakaiminato in Tottori Prefecture to take up her position as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT).

Two months into my new life as an ALT in Sakaiminato and I'm still constantly astounded by the generosity and hospitality of the people here. Before arriving in Japan, my excitement at being selected to participate in the JET program had been mixed with

feelings of nervousness and anxiety. Given my lack of Japanese proficiency, how well would I survive in a city that was more like a large country town dotted with rice fields? How well would I settle in and get along with all the people I meet?

But I really needn't have worried.

From the moment I stepped foot off the plane at Yonago airport, I was overwhelmed by my Board of Education's warm welcome and their concern to ensure that I got settled in properly. All in the first three days, I was taken out to a restaurant and shouted sushi for lunch, chauffeured to all three of my junior high schools to meet my fellow teachers, whisked away to go shopping for immediate necessities, acquainted with all the need-to-know places such as the supermarket, hospital and police station, and taken to the bank to set up an account. I was also introduced to my neighbours who, to my very pleasant surprise, have been to Australia and speak English better than I speak Japanese! They invited me over for dinner and have since taken me shopping and even driven me to see Mount Daisen.

Settling in during my first week of school, my teachers constantly worried about me despite my assurances that I was super *genki* – Are you feeling homesick? Do you have any trouble with anything? Please let us know if you need any help! Their heart-warming concern has made me feel right at home and while I do miss Sydney a little, I've also been charmed by the many curiosities that define Japanese junior high here.

At school, teachers and students change their shoes before entering the main building, and I'm still trying to get used to the amusing mismatch of the staff wearing suits against joggers. Inside the classroom, students stand quietly behind their desks to greet and bow to their teacher before and after each lesson, and while this makes Japanese high schools seem rather formal, the relationship between teachers and students here is surprisingly close.

Sometimes, watching a homeroom teacher interact with their students is akin to watching one big family. A student might playfully poke or tickle a teacher on the side just before class, or a teacher might ruffle a student's hair, pick him up or mock-chase him around the playground for an impertinent comment.

While this open display of affection took me by surprise at first, it is perhaps not strange given that Japanese students spend more time at school than at home. Each afternoon, students eat inside their classroom with their homeroom teacher, and once play time is over, everyone takes part in cleaning the entire school before the next lot of classes begins. During cleaning time, teachers and students sweep the corridors and classrooms, wipe the windows and floors and dust the blackboards. They also help to water the flowers in the garden, pick the weeds and empty the rubbish. Every day, although school officially finishes at around 4pm, students stay back for club activities and often don't go home till 5.30 or 6pm.

Immersing myself in this new school life, I've had the chance to experience many fun and exciting things. In class, I've participated in role plays with my Japanese teachers of English; during cleaning time, I've put my limited Japanese to the test and had strangely hilarious conversations with my students (*Sensei, do you know Jinja? Ginger? Oh yes, I hate eating ginger!* Sensei, Jinja is not food!); after school, I've gone around to take part in various club activities – I've participated in volleyball practice and listened to the brass band learn a new song; I've gone to the art club and asked them to help me draw flashcards for my elementary school students, and I've made ANZAC biscuits and watched *Totoro* with my English club.

No doubt, as I continue my journey on the JET program, I'll have many more opportunities to experience and learn other new things!

Serena Lai



The rope that Serena and many others helped make was used the following day for a giant tug-of-war during the Misasa Hanayu Festival.

GLOSSARY *Genki* - cheerful, full of energy *Jinja* - temple
(*Tonari no Totoro*) *Totoro* - classic animated movie by Hayao Miyazaki