

# Five years in Fukushima

**Ms Alison Lam** called Fukushima City home for five years from 2011 to 2016 when she was an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program [www.jetprogramme.org](http://www.jetprogramme.org).

It was not Alison's first time to visit Japan; she had visited as a tourist and as an exchange student at university. Her decision to participate in JET gave her a second chance to take up "missed opportunities" during her exchange when she says she was "too timid to travel outside of the Kansai area and make more friends amongst the exchange students and Japanese students". On JET, she made many friends from different age groups and countries, people she would never have met in her own social circle in Sydney, Australia.

## At work in the classroom

Each week Alison would visit up to four different schools. She spent most time at elementary schools (more primary schools are now teaching English in Japan) but she also taught at junior high schools (Australian Years 7 to 9).

Her studiously acquired CELTA/TESOL certification hadn't really prepared her for the reality of teaching children and she remembers feeling useless when she started her first junior high classes – she was little more than a "human tape recorder". "The students were impressed



program. I had the terrible realisation that I was on my own living in a foreign country and I had to start from scratch. I'm wary of attending social events and making small talk with strangers but I had to overcome my reluctance and go out to meet people." That's exactly what she did. She made a conscious effort to get out and explore the city, her new home.

"I forced myself to hop on my bike and go somewhere (no matter how far), just to eat. It was always a small victory for me to screw up my courage to go solo dining ... If the [restaurant or café] owners had a genuine interest in talking to me, then I would make an effort to visit the place regularly. When it was time for me to say

my goodbyes, I was surprised by how many people I knew ... There was a ramen grandmother who would always say *okaeri*, the bike grandpa with whom I would have

*ramen* and *gyoza* on a Friday night and the ice cream man who thanked me for being a 'heavy repeater' (regular customer) among others."

Alison also joined the English Speaking Society (ESS) which provided an opportunity for Japanese speakers to practise their English with foreigners, once a week. "I enjoyed these informal exchanges and I was always impressed by how hard my Japanese friends worked on improving their English."

## Concerns about the nuclear power plant accident

Leaving for Japan several months after the Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake on 11 March 2011, Alison thought carefully about accepting the position on JET. She explains: "Prior to receiving notification of my placement, I remember thinking that surely CLAIR would not place any of its JET applicants in danger.

"Once I heard about my placement, I had to ask for a few days to decide whether I should accept or not. I received various responses. My father and my sisters said 'yes' without a second thought. My close friends said 'It's up to you'. I didn't try my

Friends through food: Bike Grandpa and Ramen Couple with Alison



mum and grandmother as it would have been a resounding 'no'."

Based on her GP's suggestion, she looked up WHO reports about the situation in Fukushima. It was an "immense relief" once she accepted the position because then she could focus on preparing to go to Japan.

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From the outset, Alison had determined if she went on JET, particularly having failed on her first attempt, that she would stay in Fukushima for five years, the maximum number of years possible for most JET positions.

A strong motivation to stay for the full five years was the attachment that grew between her and the students she taught.

"I was very fortunate that I could watch my favourite group of students grow up from Year 5 elementary students to Year 9 junior high school students. My students were often at their most charming just before they graduated." And with time she also got to know some of the parents who were very grateful for her efforts teaching their children English.

Job satisfaction was another major reason. "I knew I was at the bottom of the school totem pole but I was always treated with respect, courtesy and appreciation ... I was always ridiculously happy whenever my JTE would say 'The kids saw you today and demanded to know when you'll be teaching.' I had never experienced this kind of job satisfaction before."

Japan itself kept her there. Exploring Japan made her a very confident solo traveller, and Alison has visited nearly all 47 prefectures—only Okinawa remains.

Read the [online transcript](http://www.sydney.au.emb-japan.go.jp/document/english/JRsp002.pdf) for Alison's full account: