

From RIT to Mt. Fuji

RIT alumni learn from their teaching experience in Japan

A fascination for all things Japanese led three alumni to pack their bags last summer and head to the other side of the world as English teachers and cultural ambassadors in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program.

After a three-day orientation in Tokyo, Zac Levine '06 (mechanical engineering) went to Gunma, the mountainous central region; Chris Main '06 (multidisciplinary studies) headed to Hokkaido, the northernmost island; and Brody Nixon '06 (international studies) left for Hiroshima City in the south to assume their yearlong teaching positions.

During the course of the year they experienced a tiny tsunami, mild earthquakes and local reactions to an unpredictable North Korean neighbor with nuclear ambitions. On a more personal level, they found themselves as minorities and sources of constant curiosity and scrutiny, yet also the recipients of genuine good will and lasting friendship.

The excitement they felt upon arriving in Japan has matured during their transition from new arrivals to residents and community members. All three accepted invitations to stay in their positions for a second year, with a third year possible.

"My students are, without a doubt, the best part of this job, and of my life here," Nixon says. "They are fantastically entertaining, insatiably curious and endlessly endear-

ing. When it came time to decide whether to re-contract or to go home in July, I didn't have to think about it for a second."

JET, the prestigious 20-year-old international exchange program sponsored by the Japanese government, hired 5,057 assistant language teachers from around the world last year to teach English to Japanese children and adult learners. Of that number, 2,759 came from the United States. The first RIT student was accepted into the program in 2002. Since then, the number of applicants from RIT has steadily grown.

The three alumni currently living in Japan have all experienced the challenges of being different in a mostly homogenous society. Each has had to find the acceptable balance between sharing their differences and fitting into their designated communities.

Blending in is something Nixon knew would be difficult.

"In Japan, people can see me coming a mile away," he says. "Not only does my face look completely different from everyone else's, but at 6-foot, 4-inches I'm almost an entire foot taller than the average Japanese person. No matter how much Japanese I learn and no matter how many customs and mannerisms I pick up, I can never blend into their society like they can blend into ours."

Nixon, originally from Manhattan, requested and received a rare urban placement, and has spent

the year teaching at three different high schools in Hiroshima City. Hiroshima was proclaimed in 1949 as a "City of Peace" following the atomic bombings of World War II and has recast itself as advocate for disarmament. Nixon feels fortunate to be in Hiroshima – "a fantastic city, with a culture that is rich, powerful, and very different from any other city in Japan or anywhere else in the world."

As teachers, each of

the alumni has wrestled with the silent treatment from their students and has had to find ways to encourage them to speak English.

"The biggest problem I run into is that a lot of Japanese students are pretty shy, and so getting them to talk is sometimes difficult," says Chris Main, who splits his time between four elementary and three middle schools in rural Nanae, Hokkaido. "Once you get them to talk, they are very open and try hard."

Levine, who teaches in the central mountainous region of Gunma, tries to encourage his students by example. One afternoon, for instance, he attended baseball practice and hit only three of the 20 pitches thrown to him. "The baseball coach told me that 'You have a good swing, and if you would have hit the ball, it would have gone really far.' I guess it's good for the kids to see that I try at something I'm not necessarily apt at," he adds. "Maybe it will encourage them to speak English to me even though their English isn't perfect."

Nixon has found his stature a useful icebreaker among his male students. "The boys are quite jealous of my height; they ask me how I got so tall, and my answer has probably made a noticeable increase in the milk consumption in Hiroshima City."

Nixon's female students outnumber their male counterparts by 70 percent at his base high school. "As a relatively young foreign male, I'm very much the center of their attention, something they do a terrible job of hiding. It encourages them to come talk to me though, and anything that makes them want to do that is fine with me."

The alumni have also had to adjust to differences between the public education systems in Japan and the United States.

Main, who stayed with his parents in Chelmsford, Mass., before leaving for Japan, points to the lunchtime routine at his rural elementary school as an example.

"The students are given a lot more responsibility than in American schools. For instance, in Japanese elementary and middle schools, students eat in the classroom with their classmates, and everyone eats the same thing. At lunchtime, the students go get their classes' food, and are in charge of serving each person and cleaning up afterwards. The students also clean the school at the end of the day, including



A group of girls joins Chris Main '06 for a photo in Matsumae, famous for its cherry trees. "There were a lot of foreigners having a party in the park that day, and lots of people would stop to take pictures of us!" Main said.

places like the hallways, gym and library. The teachers work with the students and eat with the students."

The stress level and the emphasis on exams at the Japanese schools is something the RIT alumni have noted with mixed feelings.

In Japan, junior high students must pass entrance exams to get into high school, and their curriculum is regimented and difficult, requiring extremely long hours of studying.

Levine has worked with his fellow junior high teachers to add cultural lessons to his classes. In between the required subject matter, he has taught his students about American and Japanese cultural differences, Hanukkah and, during recess, the Frisbee.

Levine, originally from Cleveland, Ohio, enjoys living in the tiny village of Takayama-Mura in Gunma, a mountainous region close to Nagano, the host of the 1998 winter Olympics. He teaches four classes a day, spending two days at the Takayama-Mura elementary and three at the junior high school.

An adult conversation class Levine holds in the evenings offers him a different perspective on Takayama-Mura. "It's interesting to find out about the townspeople's lives. Most have jobs related to agriculture, so there's a lot of discussion about rice and soba (buckwheat) fields, wild boar (we have them), and bears (those, too)."

Other aspects of residing in rural Japan have given Levine a new perspective. "Living here makes you more aware of how much you consume: food, water and otherwise," he says.

Levine's house does not have central heating. He uses an electric or kerosene heater for each room he wants to warm. "I have to turn on the boiler before I take a shower or bath and turn on and off the cooking gas. Though it's become routine, having to turn these appliances on and hearing them operate really makes me conscious of how much energy I'm using."

Living in a country familiar with natural disaster has acquainted the alumni with



The Japanese holiday known as "White Day," created in direct response to St. Valentine's Day, falls on March 14. The custom is for women to give gifts to men on Feb. 14 and for men to reciprocate the following month. Brody Nixon's students Chihiro, at left, and Yuko gave him chocolates on St. Valentine's Day; he surprised them on White Day with Rice Krispies treats – an American concoction they'd never experienced.



mild earthquakes and a small tsunami that hit Hokkaido last November.

"I was at my Japanese teacher's house at the time," Main says. "We finished lessons and went downstairs since I was getting ready to leave when we saw it. My town is up in the hills, so the chance of a tsunami hitting us

is pretty low. Mostly the reaction was, 'Oh, that will be a problem for the people who own boats or work on the water.' In the end the wave was about 10 centimeters high, shorter than some of the normal waves. It was an interesting reaction, though."

While in Japan, Levine, Main and Nixon have taken the opportunity to travel outside of their prefectures, or counties. Levine took the three-hour train ride from Takayama-Mura to Tokyo a few times, staying in a "capsule hotel" – "a cubby with a T.V. and a pillow" – and visited Thailand during winter break. Main visited Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. Nixon climbed Mt. Fuji at night "to be able to watch the sunrise from the highest point in the country."

The alumni's year in Japan has confirmed their determination to pursue careers tapping their passion for the Japanese language



In Japan, the passage from elementary school to junior high, and also from junior high to high school, is marked with lengthy graduation ceremonies following days of practice and preparation. Here, Zac Levine '06 poses with sixth-grade graduate Shiho Wakatsuki outside the Takayama Elementary School.

and culture, either through international business or teaching English as a second language, the focus of the JET program.

Hiroko Yamashita, chair of the foreign language department and coordinator of the Japanese program at RIT, attributes Levine, Main and Nixon's success in Japan to the strength of RIT's Japanese language minors and concentration, and a six-week intensive language immersion program each attended separately at Kanazawa Institute of Technology in Japan through the RIT-KIT study abroad exchange program.

"They had a solid language training of Japanese here at RIT, and successfully learned to adapt to a totally different culture in Kanazawa, which made their application strong," Yamashita says.

According to Yamashita, the JET program has selected another three RIT graduates to teach in the 2007-08 school year. They are Eric Koziol '07 (computer science), Rachel Sreebny '06 (film/animation) and Benjamin Stabley '07 (environmental science).

Since September, Levine, Main and Nixon have found their niche in their community, and are not ready to leave Japan; they have too much more to learn. Nixon speaks for the group when he says: "Of course, I miss my family and friends from home, but if I went home now I'd just want to come right back within a couple of weeks."

Susan Gawlowicz '95