

Ever since I was young, I held a strong passion for languages and the like. It's no wonder that when an opportunity arose to study abroad for a year and live immersed in a new culture and learn a new language, I was quick to apply. I remember vividly the day that the ROTARY International Youth Exchange Program came to speak at my high school's assembly (9th grade at the time) during which former exchange students shared their experiences. If I remember correctly, it wasn't even a week later that I sent in an application. The anticipation continued as future ROTARY students selected their preferences on where in the world they would explore. Of course, having knowledge of French, I initially selected countries in Europe where if all else failed I could communicate in some shape or form; looking back this was simply a crutch of sorts since the goal is to learn and discover something completely new. While Europe had strong contenders, I made a decision to take a leap of faith and try something new and most definitely outside of my comfort zone at the time of being a freshman in high school: studying abroad in Japan.

The summer of 2015 I spent researching what I could of Japan and spent time with a Japanese professor at College of Charleston to learn the very basics of the language. In its most basic form, I like to describe Japanese as having 3 separate writing systems: hiragana (ひらがな) for traditional Japanese words, katakana (カタカナ) for foreign or borrowed words, and kanji (漢字) which are derived from Chinese characters; there is a 4th, albeit non official, if you count the romaji (ローマ字) system which is written in English but represents Japanese phonetically. Even with this basic knowledge of hiragana and katakana, it wouldn't be for another few months until I got a steady grasp on kanji. During the very long plane ride(s) across the globe, I practiced writing what I could of hiragana and katakana to at least have some form of a base on. Little did I know that I could practice writing to the heart's content, but this was just the beginning. I was thankful for having been taught the basics of introductions and a few key words, however, the first realization that came to my mind as I stepped off the plane and met my

first host family was that I did in fact know close to nothing. The feeling was unnerving at first, but it was quickly replaced by excitement, intrigue, and an eagerness to learn.

A few days after my arrival, I hopped on the morning bus and drove towards the next stop on the journey: school. While there are a number of differences between American and Japanese schools, the first thing that I learned was that you have a separate pair of shoes inside the school which are left in a locker in the entrance. This is not surprising given the fact that it is customary to take off one's shoes before entering a home, some businesses, and certain religious spaces. In the U.S., it is more common for a teacher(s) and/or department to have a designated classroom space, and the students move from room to room.