

James Hofman – Hiroshima, 1997 – 1999

It is not by coincidence that our life paths are determined, but by the actions we take and the opportunities we seek when those coincidences present themselves. At many stages in his adult life, opportunity arose, and James never wasted a chance to learn from each instance, instead choosing to extract as much as he could from every experience. James's story takes a seemingly winding route, with repeated moves across the Pacific, but it is Japan that connects the narrative.

Growing up in Florida and Chicago, James had limited international experience. However, during his junior year at college, the university librarian asked him to assist some visiting Japanese exchange students with their classroom writing and presentations. He became friends with them, and they introduced him little by little to Japanese culture. Later that year, James's friend also came back from working in Japan as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) with the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. His friend spoke very highly of his experience abroad and encouraged James to apply.

With little knowledge of Japan beyond these two interactions, James accepted a position with the JET Program as an ALT in Hiroshima prefecture. He felt grateful to be placed in such a historically significant city and decided that he would not waste a moment in the country. The opportunity to live in Japan may only come once in a lifetime, he thought, so he committed to learning as much as possible about the country and culture. He went to Japan with an open mind, ready to take full advantage of whatever presented itself.

James had a special post based in the Prefectural Education Center rather than a school, which is where most ALTs are placed. He focused primarily on hosting workshops and conferences to provide continuing training to native Japanese English teachers. James grew up in academia, his father a headmaster of a private school back home, so he was familiar with formal training like this. However, he was less prepared for what was adapting to a Japanese work environment. He was thrust into a government-type of work setting with a rather formal culture, full of unspoken customs and rules of interaction. James tried to adapt by imitation, observing the mannerisms around him and mimicking as best he could. He managed, but the language barrier limited his ability to integrate. Few of his colleagues spoke English and James had the opposite problem in Japanese. He realized he needed to learn—and quickly.

Language learning was not James's forte growing up. Despite having studied both French and German in college, he found he couldn't do much with either language, so he was skeptical that he could learn Japanese. Still, he had made the commitment to do as much as he could with his time in Japan, so he dove into the self-study materials provided by the JET Program. His two Japanese friends—both of whom spoke English quite well—also decided to only speak to him in Japanese to help him along.

With effortful commitment and nearly full immersion in the language, his language skills

rapidly improved. After just one year of study, he signed up for the Japanese Language Proficiency Test and passed the Level 2 examination on his first try. To put this into perspective, Level 2 certification typically requires 1600-2800 hours of study. Done in one year, that low-end number would call for an average of 4.5 hours of study every day! Further, of those who take the Level 2 exam, an average of only 30% will pass, with many of the test takers having studied the language for several years.

As his Japanese language skills improved, James felt more comfortable in his work environment and his colleagues clearly appreciate his incredible efforts at learning their native tongue. Life was good for James and as his first year ended, he decided to stay in Japan and he renewed his JET contract for another year.

Spring is a famous time in Japan thanks to the stunning, yet fleeting, Sakura, or cherry blossoms. This season marks a time to relax under the beautiful trees with friends over drinks. It was during one of these parties that James met Tomoe through a mutual friend. They got into a discussion after she asked him about the difference between the English terms of 'hope' and 'wish'. They had a good conversation, but said their goodbyes without fanfare. Weeks later, as James walked down one of the many covered walkways in the city, he ran into Tomoe again. They talked briefly, and he mentioned giving her some prints that he had taken from the cherry blossom party, but left it at that—again, no numbers or email addresses were exchanged. It was not until a few weeks later when they happened to cross paths at the exact same place that, finally, James invited her to see him play the guitar at a local bar. It was this string of happenstance that got James the first date with his future wife.

James went back to Chicago after his two years as a JET and found a job teaching a class on Japan at his old high school. Tomoe also left Japan but, instead, went to Germany to study for a year. All the while, they maintained a long-distance relationship. After several months back in the states, James couldn't shake the feeling that he still had more to do and learn in Japan. With his now much-improved Japanese language skills and experience as a JET, he landed a job with Mazda based in Hiroshima. Along with translation, he would be helping Japanese Mazda employees navigate American culture and customs, as well as assist with their English writing and presentation skills.

Tomoe came back to Hiroshima around the same time and they picked up where they left off. Her family was very traditional, but had always encouraged Tomoe to be friendly towards foreigners, so it was not such a shock when James met her parents. Still, his excellent Japanese certainly helped. It conveyed a genuine interest in their culture and signaled his seriousness and long-term commitment. They gave their blessings as James and Tomoe exchanged vows in Hiroshima in 2001.

James had always considered going into law, but even as he applied to schools back in the states, he was hesitant to let go of his connection to Japan. His experiences in Japan had been so formative to his life's direction and worldview that he felt a strong pull to keep it a part

of his life. In the end, he decided to attend Washington University, in large part because the law school boasted a significant expertise in the Japanese legal system and politics. The university even had a concurrent masters program, so as James earned his law degree, he also obtained a Masters in Japanese History.

It was apparent to his law professors that James had a deep interest in Japan. Right before his final semester in law school, James's professor offered him what was surely a chance of a lifetime: to go to Tokyo for a semester and work in the office for a member of parliament while taking law classes at Aoyama Gakuin University. James packed his bags and, for a third time, made his way back to Japan.

Again, he was thrust head first into some very unfamiliar situations. James had never attended formal classes in Japan and entering it at the law school level was certainly not easy. However, his language skills were polished and ready for the high-level law classes, which were fully in Japanese. Just as he had done at his former post as a JET, he quickly acclimated to a different and very specific institutional standard of behavior and mannerism, but this time in the even more formal setting of the Japanese national government.

The experience was both exhausting and amazing. On his first day on the job, the emperor of Japan came in for the opening day of congress and James was the only foreigner in his presence. Most people in Japan have never seen him in person, but the emperor walked up the steps right in front of James. Who would've thought that this kid from Chicago would one day get to witness such a rare sight of Japanese royalty?

After law school, James lined up a job in San Francisco with Calvo & Clark, a firm that had a branch focusing on transpacific litigation. They had some Japanese clients, but one of his colleagues suggested that, if he really wanted to work for large Japanese clientele, he should look into the firm's branch on Guam. Guam seemed like a stretch considering that James had never been there, but it was relatively close to Japan and Tomoe's family, so after some research, they moved to the island in the summer of 2007.

A few years later, James became the in-house counsel for Docomo Pacific, Inc., where he works today. He continues to use his Japanese frequently, especially for communications with Docomo Japan, as well as to interact with visiting Docomo Japan representatives.

James and Tomoe now have two young kids and, unsurprisingly, they are deliberate about sharing the Japanese language and culture with their children. At home, they primarily speak in Japanese and his oldest son takes classes at the Japanese school. With frequent trips to Hiroshima and other parts of Japan every year, no doubt their kids will grow up with a deep appreciation and understanding of Japanese culture and tradition.

James had no idea where the JET Program would take him when he first landed in Japan, but he brought with him an openness to different cultural experiences and a willingness to

take each opportunity as a chance to learn grow. Days were not always easy and not always fun, but by fully embracing the experiences that presented themselves and getting out of his comfort zone, they were always rich and rewarding.