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Like most American teenagers these days, I grew up in a world of quickly expanding frontiers of technology. A world of revolutionary breakthroughs that change the way we live and work. In awe of all the new feats possible because of these discoveries, one place always came to mind: Japan. Ever since I was a young boy, that seemed to be the place where anything was possible.

As someone living in the Western world my whole life, I was also deeply interested in the deep roots that were the foundation for Japanese culture and beliefs. I yearned for a chance to be able to experience that firsthand; to see the differences in lifestyle not just from an outside view, but to actually live through them myself. That opportunity presented itself to me in my sophomore year of high school in the form of Yosuke Satake, that year's exchange student in Bloomington from Asahikawa under the Sister Cities Program. As I got to know him better, Yosuke encouraged me to attend meetings for next year's selection and hear what the committee had to say.

Needless to say, the appeal to me was too great and in the coming weeks I found myself further and further along in the application process. Suddenly, one day in April of 2008 I received a letter confirming my acceptance. I was altogether ecstatic and nervous. Although I'd moved around several times growing up, this would be the first time doing so without my parents -and to a country quite literally on the other side of the world, no less.

In Japan, I found myself surrounded by unique experiences from all angles. Immersed in a different culture that emphasized unity and kindness, I found people everywhere conducting themselves in an incredibly courteous manner. From the first day, I was instantly taken in and accepted by the students at Asahikawa Kougyou Technical High School. My classmates were curious about me and often willing to share a lot of themselves with me as well. After signing up for the after-school band program near the beginning of the year, I realized some of the commonalities that we all share, such as the ability to read, play, and enjoy music together. Relaxing back at home, I looked forward to learning Japanese card games from my mother and grandfather to play with my family. In early January, I was even able to witness my host sister's marriage and was given the incredible honor of being the ring bearer.

With all the differences and difficulties that one imagines could arise from such an experience, I never found myself feeling down or pessimistic because of all the incredible support I had from those around me. From my school, to the committee, to my family, I felt accepted and loved beyond I could have imagined. Perhaps most uplifting, I found myself growing daily, in time gaining solid proficiency in a language I

hardly knew anything about before and developing an intimate relationship with my Japanese family that I know I will treasure for a lifetime.

Unlike any other experience in my life, my year in Japan shaped me as a person and helped me discover who I want to be: someone with a global perspective and out-of-the-box thinking. It helped me define myself as an individual - separate from my parents - by forcing me to make my own decisions thousands of miles away from their watchful eyes and careful guidance. Most of all, it gave me the confidence and faith to know that I can achieve whatever I set my heart on.



