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The "TRAUMA" ISSUE

What's Inside?!

- 2 Letter from the Editor
- 3 Board of Directors
- 4 JETAANY Society Page
- 5 Bon O-dori Dance Class
- 6 Bar Great Harry
- 7 *To-rama Do-rama*
Japanese troubles in the U.S.
- 8 JETAA NY Softball
Tournament
- 13 *Kabuki & Rakugo*
in New York
Reviewed by
Justin Tedaldi
- 14 *The Little Travelers*
DVD Review by
Lyle Sylvander
- 15 Top 10 List



DOCTORS, EARTHQUAKES AND CHIKAN (Oh My!)

Tales of Trauma from Days of JET

Despite many wonderful and inspiring moments while on JET, there were of course moments that were downright traumatic. Let's relive some of them, shall we?

While playing baseball with my junior high school club baseball team in my host city, I twisted my knee and tore some medial meniscus cartilage. The knee ballooned to the size of a honeydew melon as I got on my bike and pedaled as fast as I could, with one leg of course, to the local hospital.

At the hospital, they took me to the MRI room and proceeded to force my knee straight (something it did NOT want to do) and then asked me to keep as still as possible for forty minutes while they took the test. I am a grown man, but the pain was so unbearable that the tears and sweat got intermixed as the area around my head began to resemble a small lake. The MRI technicians didn't talk to me during the entire episode (very unusual if you've had an MRI before) and didn't seem to think it important to tell me that they needed to run the test again. Yes, I was in that damned machine for an hour and 20 minutes while screaming bloody murder internally. When they finally took me out, I let out a fairly good-sized "Arrrrrrggghhhhh!"

In the end, I ended up talking my way into getting to go to the big city, Asahikawa, to have my surgery as there was a "knee specialist" who studied in Chicago. Even though I was able to communicate with the doctor in my local town, I did not like how behind the curve the local hospital was. It is truly amazing how advanced Japan



is technologically, yet they can still be very behind in many areas of medicine.... at least in the small towns. The big cities are a totally different ballgame.

By the way, I ended up playing baseball for the local city hall team the following year and got my revenge against the local hospital team (yes, those two MRI technicians played ball) by getting a couple base hits and scoring the winning run. Take that you crazy, pain-inflicting SOB!!

-Toby Weymiller, Hokkaido-ken, 1997-00

Once at an *enkai*, I threw up on my *kocho-sensei*. Embarrassing.

-Anonymous

I was actually not home for the most traumatic event to happen to my town while I was on JET. I was on the Shinkansen on my way up to Tokyo to meet my boyfriend Jeff at Narita. As I typically did when on the Shinkansen, I was reading the electronic news ticker at the front of the car to practice my kanji when up popped something about "O-jishin Tottori-ken, Hino-Gun," which I was pretty sure meant "Big earthquake Tottori-ken, Hino-gun."

Well, I just happened to live in Hino-gun in Tottori-ken, and I didn't like the idea of an *o-jishin* in my hometown. I turned to the businessman next to me and asked if I had indeed read the ticker correctly and that there

("Trauma" continued on page 10)

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Letter from the Editor (Fall 2007 Trauma Issue)

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The "Trauma" Issue

Why a “Trauma” issue?
Well, because not everything on JET or in our lives is rosy and heartwarming, so sometimes it’s important to acknowledge and examine the less comfortable side of life. (Plus, *shoujiki ni itte*, it makes for much better stories.)

That said, I don’t want you should have a nervous breakdown, so we’ve made sure to also include the usu fun stuff, like JETAANY Society, the Top 10 and Japanese theatre and DVD reviews. Speaking of which, make sure to read the article about the JET alum who produces travel videos for children with his wife. Traveling the world with two small children — now that’s trauma.

Ultimately, of course, it’s about finding a good balance and keeping things in perspective. And hopefully that’s what we’ve done for you in this issue. So sit back, enjoy and, most importantly, don’t panic.

Stevzn Horowitz

Newsletter Editor

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How Did We Live There?



Some of us were livin' large, and others were livin' small. But whatever our situation, we lived it up and got some new perspectives. So get comfy under your kotatsu and drink up the nice nostalgia your fellow alums serve up in the following stories.

Melissa Chavez, Nagano-ken, 2004-06

People would come over to my house and be shocked at how nice it was. I lived in teacher housing and was placed in a village, though, so every time my boyfriend was over I had to sneak him in and out because it was a major taboo for a female teacher to have guys over. I learned that when I took my guy friend from the town over to an event in my village and people insisted that he was my boyfriend for years even though I adamantly denied it. I payed about \$100 a month for rent for my place, which was unbelievable, which I totally realize now that I live in New York.

Crystal Wong, Iwate-ken, 2002-04

My first apartment in Ninohe was 35,000 yen a month, a fifteen-minute walk to school and next to a river which I constantly worried would flood. My first week there I remember waking up one morning, watching it rain very heavily and fretting that the river was rising rather quickly. I called my landlady and she reassured me that in all her years of living there the Mabeichi River had never flooded. It was also very humid and moldy — mold was everywhere — on my cabinets, on my shoes, even on my passport. One morning, I woke up with the ceiling dripping on me and decided I wanted to move out. So I moved into teachers' housing where rent was 6,000 yen a month (the parking spot was an extra 1,000 a month), and I had two floors, loads of closet space, a balcony, and a three-minute walk downhill to school. The pitfall? A pit toilet, and the old fashioned shower where i had to crank up the gas every time. And the rash of *dango mushi* that would invade in the summer. But it was all worth it for all that extra cash I had to burn!

Alexei Esikoff, Fukushima-ken, 2001-02

When I moved to Fukushima, I had just completed my undergraduate in Wisconsin. Armed with a down coat and pom-pom topped fleece hat, I was prepared for the cold outside. What I did not expect was the cold inside. The lack of insulation baffled me, and I developed a hatred for my kerosene heater. The thing was orange and boxy and I could never get the timer to work, so I would wake up on winter mornings with chattering teeth. (My parents found my complaining phone calls amusing; in the mail one day was a fluffy purple sleep suit — essentially footie pajamas for adults.) I hated lugging the sticky canister to the local gas station. And the smell of the gas was enough to make me fear for my future unborn children. It gave me headaches similar to the one I got when I pumped my own gasoline for the first time as a teenager and sprayed it in my hair. Eventually I gave up on the kerosene. I spent nights with a little space heater pointed at my head. This was a more expensive operation, but no longer did I fear giving birth to mutants.

Robertson Allen, Yamanashi-ken

Upon my arrival, I was shown to my new abode, a small house just off Route 52 in rural Yamanashi, the prefecture that claims half of Mt. Fuji. My landlady, Nagai-san, whose sizeable house effectively blocked mine from being seen from the busy road, had a small garden off to the side that I had to walk past in order to get to my house. Beyond the garden was a diminutive community shrine whose red *torii*

I had to pass through on the way to my place; every time I came home, I was entering sacred space, and it was also my backyard. I loved that shrine. Hardly anyone came to it except for some old ladies and one old man who would periodically meet there to chant scriptures. I could watch and hear them from my kitchen just a few yards away. In the space between the shrine and my house was a small yard where I would occasionally host cookouts for Japanese and ex-pat friends. The interior of my house was the space that I could truly call my own. It was a small house, one-story, but with two bedrooms, a Japanese-style room with *tatami* and sliding doors, a kitchen/dining room with long sliding glass doors opening out to the shrine, and a bathroom with the best feature of the house, a heated toilet seat. Because of poor insulation and no central heating, winters were cold — freezing, literally. I got frostbite on my toes my first year there from just living inside. (I learned how to stay warm after that.) But oddly enough, though, my fondest memories of my house come from winter, for that was the time when I could retreat and hide, when the sun would start setting by 4:00 because of the southern Japan alps behind the house half a mile away. The house, over the course of three years, became completely my own, and the *torii*

through which I had to pass to enter and leave my house became my threshold to the reality of being a foreigner working at a school in rural Japan with all of the social pressures it entails.

Scott Alprin, Aichi-ken, 1992-95

Fujii Mansion in Takakura-cho, Kariya-shi, across from the Yamazaki Pan (bread store); up the street from Kondo Bike Shop (where I bought a bike) and Kamihaza Jidoshya (where I bought a car with limited shaken left), up the street from Fuji Camera (where I bought a camera), around the block from the Jyango Italian Restaurant (where my girlfriend walked out on me during lunch), down the way from the Ito Yokado (where I shopped), over the hill from Yoshinoya (where I dined on gyudon (before Mad Cow Disease was an issue)), beyond the intersection from Meiho Video (where I violated copyright laws and rented American movies and studied the *jimaku* (subtitles)), and a ways away from the Murasaki *izakaya*, where a friend of mine met his girlfriend when we were playing Scrabble. Rent was 45,000 yen a month, and worth every penny. The trash dump was right below the balcony of the second floor, so I could drop it right down. It was the first place I ever lived in by myself that had a “step” (there was a step between the kitchen and the living room). The building was only two years old, and the floor was wooden and comfortable and the air conditioner was my savior. It was the place where I learned that one should point bowls away from oneself when doing dishes, or water can shoot from the bowl as the sponge comes around, causing wetness upon clothing. I never even spoke to a neighbor, but could hear them all coughing under their respective breaths at night. Never heard anything untoward, though.

Shannon Quinn, Kagawa-ken, 2000-01

Seto Naikai Sunsets

In some ways, my apartment in Takuma-cho was pretty symbolic of my JET Program experience. Like many fresh-out-of college JET participants, I was unable to appreciate how well taken care of I was by my host community. My spacious 2LDK three stories above the Takasegawa River came with the scent of fresh *tatami* mats, a double balcony, and sunsets over the Inland Sea. Fully furnished and complete with both a mountain bike and a *mama-chari*, the apartment was mine for less than \$150 a month. Five years later I moved into my second Japanese apartment — a compact one room *manshon*

in Yokohama. Armed with my electronic English/Japanese dictionary, I visited real estate agencies all over the Tokyo area before settling on a 250 square foot apartment that cost over six times what I paid on the JET Program. As I reluctantly handed over my deposit and key money, I realized that what I would miss most about living in Takuma

would not be the space or even the heavily subsidized rent, but rather the town full of friends I inherited when I moved in.

Nina Morganlander, Friend of JET, Wakayama-ken, 1998-99

My boss ran a small school and he was very cheap... so we lived in his house. They must have added some rooms on for teachers and a small kitchen area. All the appliances were old and falling apart. (e.g. the fridge had nails sticking out, there was no hot water in the sink, etc) Since there were only two rooms and his two daughters lived there as well, guess where the male teacher lived? In an apt, which the boss only paid part of and made the teacher pay the rest of. At least he had privacy. (We even had to share the toilet and bath with the family. Imagine that.) The best part was when a new teacher came the boss put her in his room and he and his wife took the daughters room and the daughter had to go sleep with her sister. So there was little time to clean between teachers and we all had the same furniture. This wasn't a problem until towards the end of my stay when the other teacher had bug bites or a rash all over - probably from the *dani* (mites) living in her rug. Thank goodness there were none in my tatami room, but I'm sure that it was only a matter of time!

Justin Tedaldi, Kobe-shi CIR, 2001-02

I can describe my living conditions in Japan during my year on JET in one word: Spartan. Wait, not even Spartan: Draconian. Since I only planned to spend a year in beautiful Kobe City, less was more—and the high cost of sea mail rates I paid the previous year as an exchange student made me think twice about sending any heavy electronic gadgets home. Nestled in my *danchi*

(multi-unit apartment), my biggest creature comfort was a TV/VCR I bought at the local supermarket in my first week since my predecessor left me with a busted one. Other than that, I had a faux leather desk chair with wheels; a wobbly dining

room table; a telephone with a wonky cassette answering machine; a microwave (no gas burners); and my portable CD player hooked up to computer speakers. After Christmas I had some mini electronic drum pads to thrash around on, but that was it. I checked e-mail at other people's homes, and for some reason waited near the very end of my time on JET to rent movies. Day trips to Kyoto, Nagoya and a week in Tokyo made me forget all about my cavernous apartment (and my mailbox perpetually stuffed with *enjo kosai* adverts).

Julie Holmes née Udd, Saitama-ken, Kitawabe-shi (little town bordering Ibaraki, Gunma and Tochigi. This is where the Watarase and Tone river meet!), 1998-2000

I had a sweet deal! A great one bedroom apartment, Western size, and one of my students' families lived in the one right next to mine. It was the same size but he lived there with his mother, father and two siblings. When I got there though, as a Westerner, I thought nothing of it, really. Just that I had adequate space and felt comfortable. When I first got there, my school and board of education gave me the month off as school was not in session yet. I was lonely but busy starting life in this new country and my new surroundings. I spent the first week or so getting things together at home and then the week after a girl that I had met at the JET orientation came over to spend time. "Great," I thought! "My first guest and, as I love to host, it will be great!" The whole time she was there she was soooooo homesick but that's OK... I cooked for her, I talked with her and I walked to the next town with her to see Godzilla. Appropriate first movie in Japan, no? I basically mothered her and it was somewhat of a comfort to me, too. As we had a good time and enjoyed each other's company, she invited me to go climb Mt. Fuji the next weekend with her and friends. I accepted, we took the bus up there the following Saturday, and arrived at 10 p.m. at night. We had chosen to climb overnight so we could see the sunrise from the top. Well, pretty quickly on our hike my shoelaces came undone and I stopped to tie them. When I looked up, my "friends" were far ahead and going at a faster pace than I was walking. At a checkpoint up ahead I saw them and I asked if they wanted to walk with me... They said, "Well, we want to walk fast!" Again, I asked if they were going to walk with me and they replied, "Well, we want to walk fast so that we can get up there sooner than later." I just walked away and didn't look back. All was well by the next checkpoint because I met up with a German man whom I met on the bus who believed in walking as slow as the slowest person in your group. Even though I wasn't in his group, he let his friends go ahead and stayed with me the whole way. At the top, we sat right next to my "friends" and the German man was talking loudly about never leaving anyone behind.

What do this story and my apartment have to do with each other, you ask? About a week after I returned from my mountain hike, even with the comfort of the German man I was beginning to feel very alone and out of sorts from my first few weeks in Japan. One night it was raining heavily outside. I was comfortable in my heated apartment until water began coming down like a sheet of rain all across the entrance to my bedroom, the sliding door entrance to my tatami mat room from the living room. That was it! I couldn't take it anymore. I had taken care of a girl who had repaid me with jilting me on Mt. Fuji late at night, who was the only person I had had over to my place and I was spending way

too much time there alone. My sobs were soon coming down like sheets of rain over me. After I wiped my tears away, I got several pots and pans under the entryway and called a teacher I worked with, who came over as quick as she could, and, although they never fixed anything, it didn't happen again the whole time I was there. I guess it was just the angle of the rain that night or I don't know what??? I enjoyed my apartment, realized soon when I met others living there how decadent a space it was and made many good Japanese friends to make up for the first one that ended up being one of two lousy ones... both with foreigners. I hosted others in my apartment and its walls are full of good memories from my time there. No matter what your accommodations, it's what fills the space and not your superficial surroundings or size that matter most!

Brian Hersey, Fukuoka-ken, 1994-96

As a JET, I lived in a *kyoshokuin jutaku*, i.e., public teacher housing. The building was old and a bit tired looking (although it has since been painted a vibrant-shade of pink) but my 3DK was comfortable, with a nice view out the back window of the sunset over the valley. In the winter I used just one of the rooms and my kitchen to save heating fuel. The place was big by Japanese (or, for that matter, New York) standards and cost 7,000 yen a month. No hot water, but I did have a nice tub that could be heated, and the school purchased me a seat that went over the traditional toilet (though I eventually scrapped that as I adapted to rural Japan.) The doorways were 1.8 meters high so I needed to bob my head as my 181 centimeters entered any room (a habit that remained with me for months after I left Japan). The wildlife was the only real drawback. The white-washed bedroom walls were often splattered with my blood where invading mosquitoes met their grisly demise after feasting on me in the middle of the night. The occasional roach could be heard scampering through the night on the *tatami*. There was also one centipede spotting, and a huntsman spider.

Gabriela Pedroza, Hokkaido-ken (Kurisawa-chou), 1993-94

After spending three whirlwind days in Tokyo for training, I was sick as a dog! I was dazed, confused, culture shocked, and did I mention, sick? I got sent on a plane to Hokkaido and two Japanese men picked me out of the crowd as their JET. We had a silent lunch where I displayed my inability to use chopsticks. This was followed by an hour drive through foreign cities and fields to a tiny town. Raggedly, I sat with yet another man in what appeared to be a communist era room with a doily-covered coffee table and brown sofas. Appearing in the doorway were a man and woman. "This is your mamma and pappa." The dam of hanging-in-there could no longer hold; tears secretly worked their way down my face. These kindly people, they would take care of me. They would take me home. For seven months my mamma, pappa and their three children shared a home. They taught me to count, to tell time, how to bathe. Each morning my pappa would make me eggs and toast and drive me to school. Each afternoon I heard "Okaeri!" in response to my "Tadaima!" Each evening my mamma would make us dinner. I watched a lot of TV I could not understand. And in the spring, friends of the family would bring corn and melons from their fields. I look back on those days of familial bliss fondly. I doubt they will ever know how much their kindness meant to me; how much I needed them that first summer afternoon.

Elizabeth Sharpe, Aomori-ken, Mutsu-shi, 2000-02

A small two bedroom apartment all of my own for government-subsidized \$100 a month was a dream come true, or so I thought. Come winter, the below-freezing temperatures and Aomori snow up to my waist made for a very cold apartment that soon seemed too large. There was too much space to heat. I took to curling up in my sleeping bag on the kitchen floor in front of the only large kerosene heater in the apartment. The portable kerosene heater would be in the bathroom, thawing out the pipes so I could take a bath. This really wasn't practical, nor very safe, considering the number of burst-pipe stories that circulated among JETs and Japanese alike. So, I preferred the steaming, sauna-like shower at the gym I belonged to. Or I visited the various sentos in town. Which I now remember as my very favorite memories in Japan — cold, cold apartment and hot, hot baths. All that for only \$100 a month.

Mike Harper, CIR, Kagoshima-ken, 1990-93 (now living in Seattle)

I lived in Yaku-Cho, Kagoshima Prefecture and had a very sweet deal. A small house meant for a teacher and family was all mine. Two six-*tatami* rooms and one 4.5-*tatami* room. I think it was slightly bigger than the house that the married teacher with a wife and two kids next to me had, which I found a bit embarrassing. The school board also installed a Western-style toilet for me and I know the house next to mine had the old fashioned *benjo* with a lid put over it. And all of this was rent free for me. The teacher and his family moved in next door the first year I was there. They arrived in the late afternoon and some people from the school board helped them move their stuff into the house. As it got dark someone went into my house — I was gone — and turned on the lights of the two main rooms to help illuminate the outside. That was fine with me. Since it was a small town I did not bother locking my door unless I was travelling, which meant not worrying about whether I had forgotten to lock it. I did not lock the sliding doors,

either. It also meant the mailman could just drop off my mail inside the house, since I did not have a mailbox. Once a neighbor brought a bag of *tankan* (tangerines) and left the door open a foot or so. I think that was the time I came home to find some stray cats exploring my house, who took off very quickly when they saw me. They may have lived under my house for a while. For typhoons the house also had wooden panels to slide over the screens, and it was a good thing I had them. Most people in the neighborhood knew where I lived, or could find me quickly. At least one did not. I answered the door once and it was a local politician asking for votes, and he apologetically explained that he did not expect that I would vote.

John Hyon, Yamanashi-ken

I lived in public teacher housing and only paid 7,000 yen per month for a decent place. Though if I wanted hot water, I had to fill up this thing with cold water, turn on the gas for the hot water heater and wait a few minutes. Also, my apartment complex had something called "Community Day," which meant that one Saturday a month, invariably after I'd been out drinking all night, they would knock on my door at 7:00 a.m. and I'd have to help out with something like raking leaves.

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