

# USJETAA

# Microgrant

## Fostering friendship between the peoples of Japan and the United States through grass-roots initiatives

Shantel Dickerson (Oita)

from strangers.

The stars were twinkling overhead as I gazed out over Beppu City from my own little corner of *Tanayu onsen*. Sitting high up on the mountainside of Beppu, the outdoor hot spring offers a special evening view which encompasses the glowing city below, enormous mountains casted in silhouette to the left, and to the right, the moon reflects off the abyss of darkness that is the Beppu Sea. Dazzled by the city lights and soft chirping of crickets in the nearby forest, I was lulled into complete relaxation.

Then, SPLASH!

I was abruptly awoken from the dreamland I had so vulnerably slipped into. As I spun around in the terrace bath to see what was going on, I was met with the shocked face of a five-year-old boy pointing his finger at me and exclaiming, '*Gaijin!*'

I realized two things in that moment: (1) I had never felt so exposed as I stood up, completely naked, in front of that boy and his mother; and (2) no matter how long I live in Japan, my foreign face still elicits outward shock and surprise

His mother anxiously waded over to us and profusely apologized with a number of *sumimasens* and *gomennasais*, but the weight of difference lingered on my shoulders as I escaped into the locker room to cover my foreign body with a towel.

For foreigners new to Japan, or even those who have been here for decades, that feeling of difference permeates most day-to-day interactions. Sometimes it is subtle and shows up in rather innocent, discrete ways, such as when the convenience store clerk asks you if you prefer a fork instead of chopsticks as they are heating up your pasta. Other times, it is more blatant and downright hurtful, such as the case when a Japanese man told my Japanese-American friend that Japanese men would never want to date her because she is 'too foreign'. No matter how innocent or malicious the intention is, the feeling of difference is palpable.

In speaking with expats who have lived in Japan for a number of years, this feeling of difference

is nowhere near as strong as it was 'back then'. The number of foreigners living in Japan has been increasing due to initiatives like the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) which, from 2017-2018, saw 4,712 ALTs from over 40 countries come to Japan with the aim to increase cultural understanding between Japanese culture and their home cultures. In accordance with this, the Japan Times featured an article last March saying that, 'the number of foreign nationals who lived in Japan as of the end of 2017 grew 7.5 percent from a year earlier to hit a record high of 2,561,848'.

In many ways, Japanese society is successfully adapting to this rapid influx of foreign culture, values, and way of living. For example, english can be found on many restaurant menus, and many City Halls provide a lot of their bureaucratic forms in English. In Beppu, there are Muslim Friendly maps that highlight onsen, restaurants, and places of worship that suit the needs of Muslims visiting or living in Beppu. Most recently, a local newspaper featured an LGBTQ Friendly onsen that was created in response to the struggle of transgender folk who would like to use an onsen that does not match the physical features of their body. There are endless examples of the strides Japan is taking to be more welcoming and inclusive of culturally diverse residents; however, the experiences I highlighted at the beginning of this article demonstrate that there is quite a lengthy road yet to be travelled.

The role of JETs as cultural ambassadors is critical to creating understandings that will ultimately make 'different' seem more 'normal', and thereby create a more comfortable living environment for those in Japan from diverse

cultural backgrounds. Many JETs are facilitating these cultural exchanges in their lessons, in one-on-one conversations, and in their English Clubs. Another unique opportunity for American JETs is the United States JET Alumni Association (USJETAA) microgrant. The USJETAA has established a microgrant initiative in partnership with the US Embassy in Tokyo that aims to support grassroots initiatives by American JETs. These initiatives include anything from organizing Pre-departure trainings for participants of the Shingu-Santa Cruz Business Internship Program, to english storytimes at the local library. All initiatives are sponsored because they aim to facilitate opportunities that will ultimately lead to authentic friendships, healthier workplace relationships, and a more peaceful coexistence between the peoples of Japan and the United States.

## Time to SHINE: Celebrating Women!

**Time to SHINE: Celebrating Women!**  
輝くタイム：女性を祝おう

The Theme of SHINE is "The power of women in an imperfect society which is not yet fully realized. It is essential for a vibrant and growing society to create an environment where women can demonstrate their power to the fullest extent of their ability."

Please join us in a speaking event and art contest in support of creating an environment where women shine!

**PANEL DISCUSSION: Women in the World**  
Four guest speakers from different backgrounds will share about their experiences of traveling abroad, life as a woman, how English has impacted them and pursuing their dreams. Their speeches will be followed by a question and answer session.

**ART CONTEST: Celebrating Women**  
Open to any medium: drawing, painting, sculpture, animation, etc. Create a new piece or bring your favorite. Please bring your art piece and a brief artist statement (about 100 words or less) to the event by 11:00 AM on the day. Prizes will be given to the winners. The winners will be judged by our guest speakers.

**Bungotaketa Central Community Center** 2月26日 14～16時  
38-1 Gemma, Bungotaketa-shi, Oita-ken 978-0600. Telephone: 0975-24-2317

このイベントは、2017年12月16日に開催された「Time to SHINE: Celebrating Women! 輝くタイム：女性を祝おう」の模様を伝えています。当日の様子や、参加者の声などをご紹介します。

女性が輝く世界を築くために、講演会とアートイベントにご参加ください!

西村ル・ディズカザン | 世界の女性  
様々な文化の4人のゲストが、海外への経験、女性としての生活、そして夢を叶えるために英語がどのように役に立ったかを話します。スピーチの後、質疑応答を行います。

アートコンテスト | 女性を祝おう  
イラスト、描画、彫刻、アニメーション、どんな種類の作品でもよいので、新しい作品を作ったりはあそびの自由を尽情にしてください。希望者は、作品とアーティストプロフィール、制作意図の書き、説明、作品の紹介カードを添えて、11時までに会場へ持参してください。11時～12時の間に、3名のゲストが審査を行います。2018年1月の発表会が発表者を紹介します。

豊後高田市中央公民館 2月26日 14～16時  
〒978-0600 豊後高田市中央公民館 38-1 0975-24-2317

Please note: This event will be held in both English and Japanese. イベントは英語と日本語で行われます。

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www.usjetaa.org

I collaborated with fellow-JET, Heidi Adams, to receive to two separate grants from USJETAA for events that aimed to address gender equality and racial identity issues respectively. At our first event, Time to SHINE: Celebrating Women, we invited four inspirational women from the local community to share about their professional success, their travel experiences,

and the personal challenges they have faced in pursuing their dreams. The panelists consisted of: the only female high school Principal in Oita Prefecture, a Tokyo-based film journalist, a High School English Teacher and avid traveller, and a travel agency staff member. These women told stories that aimed to inspire the young high school women in the audience to pursue their dreams and to continue studying English so that they may use it as a key to unlock personal and professional opportunities around the world.

At our second event, Two Worlds: Japanese and American Cultural Identities, we invited three guest speakers who lead a discussion workshop on the complexities of multi-racial identity in Japan. The Keynote speaker was Lance Stilp, an English Lecturer at Ritsumeikan University, who introduced the 50 audience members to the concept of diversity in Japan and demonstrated how identity conceptualization stems from the variations in culinary traditions, language, and even flower arrangement, from region to region.



Following him was Christine Niishi-Pearson, the President of the Association of Foreign Wives of Japanese, who spoke more personally to the unique challenges of her household in raising half-Japanese, half-American children. Finally, Alex Furukawa, Oita ALT, spoke about her own experience growing up half-Japanese and half-American in the United States and the challenges she continues to face as she adapts to life in Japan.

Overall, the event was incredibly successful because Japanese and foreign community members were engaged in critical dialogue with one another and brainstormed ways to improve how multi-racial identity is perceived, experienced, and addressed in Japan.



If you are already involved in your community, or looking to find a way to get involved, applying for the USJETAA microgrant, or other grants of a similar nature, are great ways to support local projects that aim to create understanding and build friendships between Japan and different cultures. You can find more information about the USJETAA microgrant [here](#), as well as the summaries of the completed events [here](#), and please take a look at the following interviews for a quick snapshot into the excellent work done by ALTs for the 2017-2018 year:

# Interviews



**Name, Prefecture, year on JET:** Leah Marshall, Kyoto-fu, 2nd Year  
**Name of your event:** American Day  
**Date it was held:** December 16th, 2017  
**Summary of the event/project:** The event started with

a small Opening Ceremony. The chaperones introduced themselves and talked about their own experiences in America. We then had icebreaking activities which included lining up by name, birthday, number of siblings etc. After that we played two team games, Pictionary and Taboo. For lunch, we had oven-baked pizza. We also had drinks and chips imported from America. After lunch we resumed Team Activities. We did "Mystery Word", Christmas Trivia, Team Origami, and Christmas Song Dictation. At the end we totaled the points and awarded 1st, 2nd, and 3rd prizes. Our 1st place prize was an American candy gift bag as well as their choice of a famous children's book (written in English of course). Our 2nd and 3rd place prizes were also given gift bags.



**Name, Prefecture, year on JET:** Sarah Bullwinkle, Nara Prefecture, 2nd year

**Name of your event:**

*Eigodeohanashikai* (English Story Time)

**Date it was held:** May 19th, 2018

**Summary of the event/project:**

Children come to the local library for English/Japanese story time every other month. We sing English songs, do crafts in English, and play games together. Our goal is to foster an interest in English learning while introducing American and global values through children's literature. The library staff and I will often prepare two books to read (one Japanese and one non-Japanese) which are connected by a common theme. In this vein, adults and young children alike gain the ability to distinguish cultural differences and similarities. Our library project offers a fun, friendly way to create global bonds through literature.

**Name, Prefecture, year on JET:**

Teresa Fong, Tokyo, 3rd Year

**Name of your event:** "Free Scholarship Money for International Education in the U.S."

**Date it was held:** April 14th, 2018

**Summary of the event/project:**

In this project, I give out candy bags filled with chocolate coins with a small flyer explaining the difference between "scholarships" and "loans" in Japanese. This project's main goal is to distinguish the difference between what scholarships and loans are since in Japanese, there is one word that means both types of funding. On the flyer is also a website containing all the resources I found for Japanese students. This project will hopefully open my students' and their parents' eyes to the millions of dollars waiting for them to claim. The Watanabe Scholarship program, for example, has a \$10 million endowment supporting students from Japan to study in the United States. There are many more scholarships available to help Japanese students receive an education abroad, whether it's in STEM or art. The products of this project, such as the resource database, are shared with professionals in the international education field.



**Name, Prefecture, year on JET:** Matt Wong, Hyogo, 3rd year

**Name of your event:** English Immersion: Providing Authentic Reading Opportunities

**Date it was held:** December 15th, 2017 - June 15th, 2018

**Summary of the event/project:**

The project aimed to buy authentic English books and create a book report system to record student

progress. Books were bought via Amazon.com (US site) and shipped to the school where they were eventually integrated into the library electronic checkout system. The students have been introduced to the project and have read one or two books, but have not yet checked out the books from the library.



**Name, Prefecture, year on JET:** Giuliana Alfinito, Wakayama-ken, 1st year

**Name of your event:** Pre-Departure Training for the Shingu-Santa Cruz Business Internship Program

**Date it was held/will be held:** May, 2018 (exact date is TBD)

**Summary of the event/project:** I, together with the Shingu Sister City Committee and Santa Cruz Sister City Committee, will organize and provide the pre-departure training needed for the Shingu-Santa Cruz Business Internship Program. The Shingu and Santa Cruz Sister City Committees are in the process of selecting a highly motivated Shingu City resident for this internship program. During the summer of 2018, the individual will have the opportunity to stay in Santa Cruz, California for three months with a host family, and will intern at local organization in order to learn about American business practices. The intern will require pre-departure training to ensure a smooth transition into the American workforce. This training will include weekly lessons in English, an online course in American business culture, and training seminars given via Skype by the organization accepting the intern. It will last for five weeks, and will be held at Shingu City Hall.