

Ehime AJET

By Mikans, For Mikans

Backtrack #12: A Bigger Leap of Faith (Gary Haase, Matsuyama ALT 1996-1999)



What's your name, when and where was your placement, and where are you from originally?

Greetings! Thank you for reaching out. I am Gary Haase. I came to Japan in 1996 as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). I was based at the Ehime Prefecture Educational Research Center in Matsuyama. I also visited several high schools, such as Matsuyama Minami, Oda, Kamiukena, Matsuyama Minami Tobe Bunko, and Iyo. I am from Los Angeles, California, U.S.A. I ended up staying on JET for three years, which was the maximum placement time back then.



How did you find out about JET, and what led you to apply?

I think I became aware of the JET Program when I saw a flyer about JET at my university in California. The JET Program seemed to offer opportunities to gain some experience in the field of education, to learn about other cultures, to live on my own in a foreign country, and to pay off my college loans. My major was English, and as a university student I was wondering if I should try to become a teacher, or if I should attempt to go to law school.



What did you hope to achieve on JET, and did that change during your time here?

I was hoping to help my students learn some English and to share a bit about my perspective as a guy from L.A. But I think I ended up learning more from my students, colleagues, and neighbors than they learned from me. My three years on JET were a game changer for me. I met many wonderful students. My predecessor was a funny Canadian who paved the way for me to have an awesome experience. During the pre-departure phase in L.A., before I flew from the U.S. to Japan (we got to fly business class in 1996!), my predecessor mailed to me an orientation video (we still used VHS tapes in 1996) to welcome me. I knew right away that I was going to enjoy this JET adventure. My JET boss in Matsuyama was a kind father figure who kept me laughing each day and who was a big reason why I kept wanting to renew my contract each year. I am grateful for the Japanese Teachers of English who happened to cross paths with me. And I am thankful for what I learned from the other JETs in Ehime—I gained a better understanding of the U.S. by spending time with colleagues from places like the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.



What is your lasting impression of the work you did on JET and the communities you were part of?

I feel fortunate that I was accepted into the JET Program, and that I could spend three years as an ALT in Ehime. I am hoping that I contributed in some small way to the education and internationalization going on through the JET Program. But as I mentioned above, I probably benefited more from the experience than those who I encountered. While I was living in Ehime, I was the lucky recipient of random acts of kindness, generosity, and compassion, in various forms and often when I was not expecting it. And now that I have experience living in Japan as a non-JET, and as a married father, I can better appreciate how special the JET Program experience is. JETs receive a lot of support and get to participate in notable pursuits that some folks do not get to enjoy.



Where did JET lead you?

My JET Program contract may have ended over 20 years ago, but this Japan experience from 1996 to 1999 has continued to touch significant aspects of my life to this day. In terms of career development, I returned to the U.S. for law school. I think that my JET experience made me a more well-rounded applicant and a better law student. I ended up becoming a California-licensed attorney, but I have found ways to continue teaching. I focus on U.S. immigration law at GOH Foreign Law Office, based out of Osaka, Japan, and I teach a few classes each week. Many of my U.S. immigration clients are current and former JETs. (If a U.S. citizen is in a relationship with someone who is not a U.S. citizen, I may be able to assist this international couple when they wish to move to the U.S.) My enjoyment as a U.S. immigration lawyer can be traced back to some of the features that attracted me to the JET Program in the first place. I find my law office work touching on some of the JET Program themes like promoting grassroots international exchange, participating in a global society that embraces people from various backgrounds, and building an international network of colleagues and clients. I have witnessed through JET the positives that can occur when you communicate with people who were born somewhere else. As a JET participant, I could enjoy the benefits of interacting with a different language and culture, and I support people who may be having a similar experience. In my personal life, I ended up marrying my Japanese teacher who I met in Kyoto during the summer before my third year on JET. We lived in California after the JET Program, but in 2010 we moved with our daughter from the U.S. back to Japan. Now I feel nostalgic (and old) when I meet the current Kansai ALTs who teach at my daughter's junior high school.



Right now, some incoming JETs have been delayed by more than a year, and are in the difficult position of choosing to indefinitely wait for Japan to open up or to give up on coming here. Do you have any comments or advice for them during this time?

The JET Program was a top-notch learning opportunity for me. The world has changed a lot in the past 20 years, but I continue to believe in the importance of international exchange. I hope that you get the chance to experience the good times and positivity that I, and many of my JET colleagues, experienced while on JET.



If you had been in their position, do you think you would have gone on JET if you'd been in limbo for a year?

It is hard to compare 2021 to 1996. A lot has changed. Back in 1996 moving to a foreign country might have been a bigger leap of faith because, for example, the internet was not as widely used and people could not connect as easily with others in distant locations. However, JET is one of the best things that I have ever done. I think that the JET experience is something that holds up well over time, and that JETs get to develop skills that can be used in a variety of industries and situations. I was able to meet some incredible people while on JET. JET made me more comfortable viewing things from different perspectives. It taught me how to adapt to new environments. It pushed me to participate in ways that I would not have if I had stayed home. But like any program or organization, there will be challenges, and each person will have their unique journey. I think that I was ready to enjoy life as a JET, and that I was fortunate to get placed with some wonderful colleagues. Some JETs were not as happy with their placements, and some JETs felt that one year was more than enough as an ALT. I hope that incoming JETs get the chance to come to Japan and to take advantage of everything that the adventure has to offer.



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