

Susan Singer
(1990~92)

When I arrived at LIOJ in February of 1990, I was fresh out of graduate school, M.Ed. in hand, ready to take on the world. I arrived knowing exactly two words of Japanese. "*Hajimemashite*" and "*tokei*." The following two years would probably be the most life-changing years for me. Not only did I not speak the language, but I took the job in Japan knowing nothing at all about the country, customs, or traditions. My arrival there marked the starting point of a new beginning for me, not only professionally, but personally. I learned so much, it is difficult to condense it into a couple of paragraphs.

Some things that stick out in my mind, even twelve years later are:

Professional things:

- Getting a new crew of professional businessmen who were so uncomfortable on our first picture taking day, then looking at them again at the farewell party and noticing the changes.
- Starting team teaching at the junior high schools and feeling like a total outsider.
- Finishing the school year at the junior high schools and feeling like part of the staff.
- Dinners and lunches with business students...Tuesday evening sashimi...
- Going downtown and hearing my junior high students screeching "Susan-sensei da!!!"

Personal things:

- Spending my first day wandering around Picasso Park, not knowing which bathroom to go into.
- Walking back from town against the tide of blue uniforms of high school students leaving school and feeling like I was an alien of some sort.
- Riding my bike to calligraphy class and having the fish store owner wave at me, laughing at my little red elementary school student's case.
- Playing volleyball with a group of Japanese factory workers who spoke not a word of English.
- Talking to my neighbor's kids because the parents were too shy to speak to me.
- Being able to give directions to my apartment to the cab driver for the first time.

In retrospect, many of my personal experiences at the time were like being born and growing up all over again. My professional experiences, as I recognize now, were the stones on which I have built my professional foundation and my career. Though there were both good and bad, I know I could never replace these experiences, nor can I imagine being who I am without having been through them. My two years, both in Japan and at LIOJ, have made me a more open-minded, well-rounded, enthusiastic teacher and person.

Since leaving Japan, I have traveled, taught, and lived in other countries, experiencing other cultures, but Japan and LIOJ remain, to this day, professionally the first and personally the most affecting of my experiences. I have gone on to study and teach Japanese, and to promote understanding and open-mindedness of other languages and cultures in my students whenever possible. This is not only vital for them if they travel, but in our ever-shrinking world. It is important to me as a teacher and a traveler for my students to know that there is so much more out there than what they know and see. Living and teaching in an urban school situation, my work is

certainly cut out for me, but I enjoy the challenge of helping minds open, some for the very first time.