

Students benefit from homestays without going overseas

Traveling overseas for a homestay to brush up their English or try life in another culture has become almost de rigeur for Japanese students, with many going as teenagers through their schools or as a private arrangement. However, the costs involved mean such an experience is often beyond the reach of students from impoverished backgrounds, such as those from single-parent households or children's homes.

A Tokyo-based NPO called Chokkura Home Stay (CHS) is working to change this, one student at a time. "Chokkura" means "for a short while" in Japanese and, as the name suggests, CHS arranges mini domestic "homestays" with foreign families in Japan. The period can range from a few hours to a weekend.

CHS is the brainchild of Keiko Ishikawa, who began reflecting on cultural differences after transferring from international school to the Japanese education system as a youngster. Finding that many of her peers regarded English simply as a language tool, she wanted to help open people's eyes to the value of cultural exchange as a way to embrace differences and develop mutual respect.

"I thought Japanese people, and especially teenagers, need an opportunity to experience cultural differences," she says. "So that they will know how to communicate and accept different cultures, and maybe even learn from other cultures as well."

Founded in 2014, CHS matches students in the Kanto area with international families willing to open their homes. Along with a website, CHS is proactively using social media to reach out through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Part of the program's success lies with careful interviewing and matching of hosts and guests alike.

According to participant Atsu, CHS allowed her to make friends with non-Japanese for the first time. "Even though my home visit was in Japan, spending time with my international host was like experiencing the fun of an overseas homestay and a different lifestyle," she says.

Another student called Murakami admits that starting small was helpful for developing his confidence. "I think that going overseas right off the bat would be difficult for me," he explains. "But by starting off with a short domestic homestay, I could participate without any worries."

It isn't just the guests who benefit. British couple Jack and Victoria May are on a short-term assignment in Tokyo. As busy parents of two small children living in a predominantly expat area, they were delighted at the rare opportunity to get to know a Japanese teenager.

“It was great to be able to give something back to the community here, and hopefully boost Noriko’s confidence for speaking English and traveling outside of Japan,” says Jack.

“She was soon playing Snakes & Ladders, a traditional British board game, with us and then she taught us some origami and did a Japanese tea and sweet-tasting. We keep in touch on Instagram and are looking forward to meeting up again soon,” Victoria adds.

Host families do not necessarily have to be foreign nationals. In the case of the Foster family, wife Lilli is American, while husband Cary grew up in Japan before moving to the U.S. in his teens. The couple use both English and Japanese with their young son.

“When we found out about Chokkura through Facebook, we knew it was something we wanted to contribute to. Cary benefited greatly as a child from the kindness of host families in the U.S.,” says Lilli. “The best thing is being able to open our home and have a new ‘family member,’ be it for a few hours or overnight. It’s quite special.”

Nor do hosts need to be families. Kiwi Wendy Harnett lives alone much of the time and has a busy travel schedule for her work, but this, she says, didn’t stop her volunteering to host students. “I have done several homestays now and really enjoy it. The best thing about the program for me is being able to meet and encourage the students I have spent time with. It is a small thing for me to volunteer my time but is really appreciated by the students.”

As a result of her CHS homestay, Erin was determined to buckle down and study English. “This was my first time speaking only in English for several hours and it was a great experience. I definitely felt that I need to study English much, much more,” says the teenager. “Since my homestay, I really feel that I’m engaging more proactively in my English classes at school now.”

While most students cite developing confidence in English and learning about another culture as the main benefits of the program, at least one ended up with much more.

“After the homestay, we issue a ‘certificate of participation’,” explains Ishikawa. “One of the participants was able to enter a university through a scholarship program, because they gained some points by showing the certification from our domestic homestay program.”