

When I came to Japan almost a year ago, I was a little bit hesitant to join a lot of activities with other ALTs. I thought that since I really wanted to learn Japanese, there was no sense in filling my weekends and social calendar with soccer games, events and parties just like I could do at home. But after a few months, I realized that the community of ALTs in Japan is really diverse and that I can learn a lot and have a lot of fun with them at the same time that I am studying Japanese. Now, I don't really know what I've gotten myself into, but I've agreed, along with one other ALT from Ueno, to be the co-director of the organization for ALTs in Mie.

I am an ALT that works for Mie Board of Education under the JET Program. JET means Japan Exchange Teaching program, and not only are there English ALTs in this program, but also ALTs for other languages and CIRs, or Coordinator for International Relations. This year in Mie there were about 120 foreigners working in the JET Program. Next year, there will be about 100. This is a lot of people, but we are all spread out in big cities on the Kintetsu line as well as in other small towns and villages all the way from Inabe in the North to Kumano in the South. I am lucky to live in a city like Tsu, where there are several other ALTs and many people who speak English. But not all ALTs are so lucky, and it can be especially stressful for an ALT who doesn't speak Japanese to be isolated in a small village in the mountains.

This is why we have an organization called AJET, or the Association for JET Program participants, which keeps everyone in touch with each other, and plans events for anyone who is interested in staying in touch with the rest of the JET community. In August, for example, we are planning a two-day orientation for all the new JET participants in Mie, organizing trips to famous spots around Mie like the Ninja museum in Iga-Ueno, and planning trips to take the new people, or "newbies," to get cell phones, re-entry permits and all that fun stuff. I took part in a lot of these things last year, and they helped me get to know the people who I am good friends with now. I always enjoyed myself at AJET events, so I started going to AJET meetings a few months ago when they needed more volunteers to fill positions of people who are leaving this July.

Over the course of the past few months, I have seen how much time and planning goes into all the AJET activities that I've taken part in since I came to Japan. My first instinct was to get out while I still had the chance, but in the end, I decided that someone has to do the work to plan these events, so I might as well do my part to help. This is how I've found myself at the head of the organization, with another ALT from Ueno, to organize and put on all the events throughout the upcoming year. I'm still not sure if I know what I'm getting myself into. I'm sure it will be a lot of work, but I am looking forward to working together with other ALTs and CIRs to make this year as fun for all the newbies as my first year was for me.