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CIR's Corner

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Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

This Month's Topic: Gresham, Oregon Part 2

Happy New Year everyone!

Last month, I came back from the city of Gresham, Oregon, USA, which is located to the east of Portland. I was a chaperone for a group of junior high school students visiting for a homestay program. Despite being about a 3-hour drive from my hometown Seattle, I had never been to Gresham before this trip. The students and I experienced many things, and I will share some of them with you this month. Since it's a long story, I will only write about half of my trip this month.

Day 1: Thursday, 11/30

I left my home at around 8 to catch the bus straight to New Chitose Airport. When I said goodbye to my daughter, there were no tears. She is only five years old, but she's a strong girl.

I met up with the six students and one other chaperone, English teacher Mr. Matsui, at the airport. The students were talking excitedly about the upcoming journey. When we arrived at Haneda Airport, we had our last Japanese meal: soba.



The flight from Tokyo to LA took about 9 hours. I couldn't sleep at all on the plane, so I watched movies the whole time.

Even though we left Japan on 11/30, we arrived in LA on 11/30. It felt like we had time traveled. I did some shopping and ate some of my favorite American snacks while waiting for the next flight. The students were exhausted, so they slept.



After a 4-hour layover, we finally boarded our flight to Portland. The flight was about 2.5 hours, relatively short for a domestic flight in the US.

A yellow school bus was waiting for us when we arrived in Portland. Steven the bus driver was very friendly, and he told me that he hosted students from Ebetsu many years ago.

It was after 6 PM when we arrived, so it was already dark out, but that didn't stop the students from admiring the scenery from the windows of the school bus. They were impressed by all the houses lit up by Christmas lights. Many Americans decorate their houses with lights during the holiday season.



We checked in to our hotel in Gresham, and went to Burgerville for dinner. Burgerville is a fast food chain that can only be found in the Portland area. It was my first time trying it, but the burger was loaded with so many fresh vegetables that I was surprised it's fast food. It was so delicious that just thinking about that burger makes my mouth water.



After dinner, we returned to the hotel, and I joined the five girls in the pool. They were playing noisily, and angered a Santa Claus lookalike who was trying to enjoy the hot tub.

When I returned to my room, I got in the Jacuzzi bathtub and watched reruns of popular shows from my childhood like *Friends* and *Seinfeld* on Nick at Nite. That channel used to play shows from the 50s through the 70s, such as *I Love Lucy* and *Happy Days*, but nowadays it seems to be playing only 90s shows. I felt my age in that moment.

Day 2: Friday, 12/1

We slept in a bit, and then the group headed to Tsuru Island, a Japanese garden located in the heart of Gresham. The director Jim Card and a volunteer Mary Ann Buck showed us around. We were so impressed by Jim's knowledge and his passion for Japanese gardening. He pointed out all of

the fine details of the garden to us. For example, every plant in the garden is a species from Japan. In addition to the garden, there is Ebetsu Plaza. The magnificent crane statue there welcomes Gresham citizens to the space. It is surrounded by several Japanese cherry blossom trees, two of which were planted by the former mayors of Gresham and Ebetsu, and according to Jim, Ebetsu Plaza is the perfect spot to view cherry blossoms in the spring. In front of Ebetsu Plaza, there is the Kyoudou Center, where Japanese culture and gardening courses are held. I felt the spirit of Japan on Tsuru Island.



After our tour of Tsuru Island, Jim and Mary Ann gave us some gifts. I was especially happy to receive Mary Ann's homemade chocolate chip cookies. Jim walked with us to downtown Gresham, and treated us to cupcakes from the bakery, Sugar Cubed. He said we could choose anything we liked, so in the spirit of Christmas, I chose a gingerbread cupcake. There was a cute gingerbread man on top. I ate it so fast that I forgot to take a picture of it. Sorry.



We parted with Jim, and went to Wall Street Pizza for lunch. It was New York style pizza, and they sold huge slices like the ones at Costco. There was a game room with crane games and air hockey, so the students played there after they finished eating.

We finished our lunch and visited the Gresham Area Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center. Stayce Blume, CEO, welcomed us, and passed out

pamphlets about Gresham to the students. She had just visited Ebetsu last October. She introduced us to Doug Walker, owner of Walker Travel and Cruises. He gave us chocolate and spoke fondly of his trip to Ebetsu many years ago. The people of Gresham seemingly had all kinds of connections to Ebetsu.



The school bus pulled up across the street from the Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center, so we were finally on our way to Deep Creek-Damascus K-8 School (DCD) to meet the host families. Principal Kim Barker and the host students were waiting for us at the school entrance. First, the students went on a school tour. A “K-8 school” has students from kindergarten through the 8th grade, but these schools aren’t very common. “There aren’t a lot of kids out here, so the elementary and middle schools were combined,” explained Kim. With only 420 students, it’s not a large school, but the students were friendly and greeted us with smiles. It seemed like a wonderful environment for Ebetsu’s students.



After school, the students went home with their host families to drop off their luggage and rest for a little while before dinner. We all met up at the Old Spaghetti Factory, a chain restaurant that is popular with families. There was one in Seattle when I was a child, and I used to love to eat there on special occasions. Just as the name suggests, the restaurant’s specialty is spaghetti. However, I wanted

to eat something that wasn’t so common in Japan, so I chose lasagna. I saw the students eating a lot and trying hard to speak English with their host families, so I knew they were going to have a great weekend!



Day 3: Saturday, 12/2

Since the students were spending the weekend with their host families, I decided to check out Portland in preparation for our planned sightseeing visit on 12/8. However, I had never been to Portland, so I was nervous about going alone. Luckily, my good friend Phylcia is a Portland native, and she agreed to show me around. I had originally met Phylcia while we were both teaching English in Sapporo, but she returned to her hometown a few years ago.

I headed to Portland by light rail, and the trip took about 45 minutes. Passengers around me were having loud conversations, talking on the phone, and watching videos without headphones, and they reminded me that things are different in the US.

Phylcia and I planned to meet at the Japanese American Museum of Oregon, located in the Old Town area of Portland. I read online that the area has been dangerous recently, and when I arrived, I saw tents belonging to homeless people pitched along the sidewalks. However, no one caused any trouble for me and I arrived safely at my destination. Sadly, it has become very expensive to live in Portland, so the number of people living on the streets has increased.

I was planning to visit the museum with the students the following week, so at this time I only checked out the gift shop. Next, Phylcia showed me

where to buy interesting souvenirs and where the best food carts were. Portland is home to over 600 food carts and counting. The areas where multiple food carts are gathered are called food cart “pods.” “There are a lot of different kinds of food in one area, so everyone can choose what they like. I think your students will enjoy it!” Phylcia recommended.



However, we didn't eat our lunch at a food cart pod. Instead, we went to a Vietnamese restaurant. After the end of the Vietnam War in the 70s, many Vietnamese refugees settled in cities

on the West Coast of the United States, including Seattle and Portland. Therefore, there are many Vietnamese restaurants, and phở is perhaps the most famous type of Vietnamese cuisine. Do you know how to pronounce “phở”? Many people who aren't familiar with Vietnamese food say it like “foh” (フォー) but actually, “fuh” (フア) is closer to the correct pronunciation.

I hadn't seen Phylcia in a while, so we talked for a long time. So long, that we didn't notice the restaurant had closed. After visiting a few more shops it was starting to get dark, so I took the bus back to the hotel in Gresham. It took about one hour, but it was more convenient than the light rail since the bus stop was closer to the hotel. I bought a few snacks and drinks and the nearby store, and spent the rest of the evening on standby at the hotel.

Day 4: Sunday, 12/3

On Sunday, my friend from Seattle drove down to Gresham to visit me. Her name is Toshiko, and we met in the 90s when she came to Seattle for a homestay program. She's currently a nurse, working at a Seattle hospital.

Toshiko left Seattle in the morning, so she arrived in Gresham right after noon. We had lunch at the Thai restaurant next to the hotel, and then

headed to the outlet mall in the neighboring city of Troutdale. Even though it was an outlet mall, nothing felt cheap with the abysmal exchange rate.

I experienced some culture shock while shopping. Clerks were asking me, “Do you need a bag?” Of course, clerks in Japan ask that too, but they let customers know that bags are not free. The clerks in America didn't say anything about a bag fee, so I assumed they are free of charge, and said I'd like one. However, Toshiko was carrying her own bag. “Bags aren't free here. Check your receipt,” she said. Sure enough, there was a 10¢ (14 円) charge. I thought that was pretty sneaky.

Since it was Sunday, the mall closed early at 6 PM. Toshiko's car was full of the souvenirs and Christmas presents I had bought. I was worried about whether everything would fit in my suitcases. I still had leftover Thai food from lunch, so I ate that in my hotel room for dinner. Since American portions are so big, I'm glad restaurants allow doggie bags.

Day 5: Monday, 12/4

The other chaperone, Mr. Matsui, and I woke up bright and early, and waited in the lobby for Kim to pick us up. She took us through the Starbucks drive thru before heading to DCD. We waited for the students in the office. I was relieved to see everyone looking well.

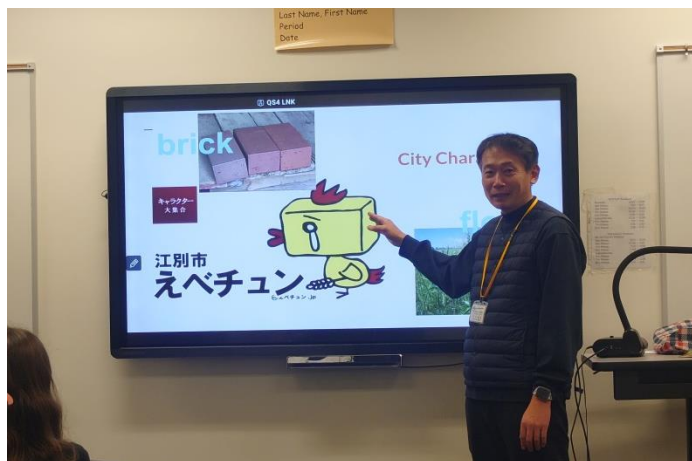
American schools serve breakfast in addition to lunch. I used to eat breakfast at school every day, so I was curious about DCD's breakfast. The menu was pancakes and syrup, sausage patties, cereal and milk, hard-boiled eggs, and orange juice. It was similar to what I ate at school as a kid, but the pancakes were made with whole-wheat flour. I guess they are trying to make meals healthier.



Mr. Matsui had prepared a lesson on Japanese culture, so I helped him with his classes. We taught four classes from 2nd to 5th period. DCD has eight periods in a day. 1st period is homeroom and is only 19 minutes, but the other periods are 45 minutes. There are only three minutes between classes, and lunch is 30 minutes. The start and end times of classes are oddly specific, and the schedule is rather tight. When I was in middle school, my schedule was similar to a Japanese school schedule with six periods. However, I checked my middle school's current schedule on the internet, and it looks like DCD's schedule. Perhaps increasing classes and reducing break time is a current trend in America.

<u>MS Schedule</u>	<u>Wednesday Schedule</u>
1st- 8:50-9:09	2nd- 9:50-10:31
2nd- 9:12-9:57	3rd- 10:34-11:13
3rd- 10:00-10:45	4th- 11:16-11:55
4h- 10:48-11:33	5th-11:58-12:37
5th- 11:36-12:21	Lunch 12:42-1:12
Lunch 12:26-12:56	6th-1:17-1:56
6th- 1:01-1:45	7th- 1:59-2:38
7th- 1:48-2:33	8th- 2:41-3:20
8th- 2:36-3:20	

In Mr. Matsui's classes the students tried a Japan quiz, played *kendama* (Japanese cup-and-ball game), and folded an origami crane. In the first class, I didn't know how to fold a crane, so I struggled along with the students. I got better and better as we taught more classes. The DCD students seemed to enjoy learning about Japan.



With the morning classes done, it was time for lunch. Today's options were a chicken burger, a spicy chicken burger, or a sun butter and jelly (jam)

sandwich. Sun butter is made from ground sunflower seeds, and is used as a spread instead of peanut butter. American children love PB&J (peanut butter and jelly sandwiches), but according to Kim, there are many students with peanut allergies, so they use sun butter at school.

I didn't eat the sun butter and jelly. I chose the spicy chicken burger. In Japan, anything with "spicy" in the name isn't that spicy, but this burger lived up to its name. I can handle somewhat spicy food, so I liked it, but I don't think anything this spicy would be served in a Japanese school lunch.



After lunch, the president of the Gresham Area Chamber of Commerce, Brian York, and two founders of Chocolat-e, a local gourmet chocolate company, came to DCD to host a chocolate tasting session for us. Brian had visited Ebetsu last October. The two founders, Norm and Jeanyves, are American and French, respectively. Before trying the chocolate, Norm and Jeanyves introduced their company.

The origin of the name Chocolat-e comes from French *chocolat* with the *e* added on the end from English *chocolate*. The hyphen represents the bridge between the two cultures. Chocolat-e is a company that cares deeply about human rights and the environment. They are against child labor and work hard to improve the lives of cacao farmers. In addition, their packaging uses recycled paper and plant-based cellophane, and everything is recyclable.

There are six kinds of chocolate, made from carefully selected cacao beans produced in six countries: Madagascar, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Ecuador, Belize, and Brazil. The gourmet chocolates are made according to recipes by award-winning

French pastry chef and chocolatier, Frédéric Cassel. (Frédéric has his own boutique in the upscale neighborhood of Ginza, Tokyo.) We started our tasting session with four dark chocolates. They are each the exact same recipe; the only difference is the origin of the beans. Each chocolate has its own flavor, and through tasting, I experienced firsthand the important influence of the environment on food. There were two kinds of milk chocolate, which both contained more cacao than standard milk chocolate, so the company refers to them as “dark milk chocolate.” We had so much fun eating chocolate and sharing our thoughts on it. Each type was so delicious, but deep down I am a milk chocolate lover, so my favorite was the Brazil 43%.



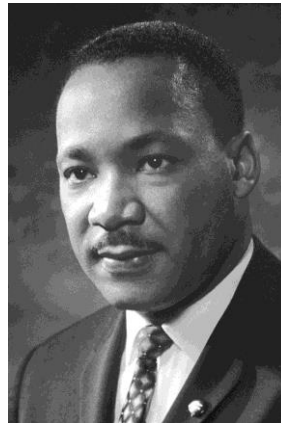
Mr. Matsui and I observed the rest of the afternoon classes, and went to a student basketball game after school. Unfortunately, DCD lost.

For dinner, Kim took us to the food cart pod at Troutdale Station. There were so many kinds of food, such as hamburgers, chicken wings, sushi, Chinese, Peruvian, and Indian. I went with a Middle Eastern falafel sandwich. Falafel is made of ground chickpeas mixed with various herbs and spices, and then deep-fried. It looks like a croquette, and is often sandwiched in pita bread. I almost never have the opportunity to eat this in Japan, and it was delicious!



Monday felt like the start of the week, but our trip was already half over. Read about the rest of the trip in next month's issue of *CIR's Corner*! ★

Martin Luther King Jr. Day



Martin Luther King Jr. Day is an American national holiday. We also call it “MLK Day” for short. Dr. King was born on January 15, but MLK Day is celebrated on the third Monday of January every year. MLK Day in 2024 falls on January 15, Dr. King's actual birthday.

Dr. King was a leader in the American civil rights movement, and he participated in non-violent protest. His “I Have a Dream” speech is one of the most famous speeches in US history, and I heard it's even covered in some of Japan's English textbooks. After Dr. King was assassinated in 1968, the movement to celebrate his birthday as a national holiday began. In 1980, Stevie Wonder released “Happy Birthday,” and thanks to this song, most Americans started to support MLK Day. President Reagan made it an official holiday in 1983.

However, laws vary by state, and some states chose not to observe MLK Day. The year 2000 was the first time that MLK Day was recognized by every state in the nation. Confederate General Robert E. Lee's birthday is on January 19, so even now, some Southern states celebrate MLK Day alongside “Robert E. Lee Day”!

MLK Day gives most people a day off from school and work, but rather than using it as a day to lie around doing nothing, it is better spent serving the community through volunteer work or participating in events that promote peace. My school always held a big assembly to showcase presentations and performances related to Dr. King's teachings. At the end of the assembly, everyone sang Stevie Wonder's “Happy Birthday” together. I looked forward to this big event every year. ★

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