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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: Students from Gresham – Part 2

From late June to early July, we had many students visiting from our sister city, Gresham, Oregon. This month, I'm going to tell you about the students from Gresham High School.



Gresham High School opened in 1915, and it is located in historic downtown Gresham. The school underwent extensive renovations from 2018 to 2021, so the building is now quite nice. There are 4 grades, and about 1600 students. Every year from late June to mid-July, students who are studying Japanese come to Ebetsu for sister city exchange.

This year's students were Isaiah and Xavier. They stayed from June 25 to July 18, which was about three weeks. Isaiah is 18, and since he just graduated from high school, he is starting at Mount Hood Community College this month. Xavier is 17, and he is starting his senior year. The two of them stayed with host families. For school, Xavier was placed in a 2nd year class at Towanomori Sanai High School, while Isaiah was placed in a 3rd year class at Ebetsu High School. Through this program, they were able to experience Japanese culture and everyday life.

We ran into a bit of trouble on the first day. When we were on our way to the airport to pick them up, I got a call from an international number I didn't recognize. It was Isaiah. He calmly explained that they had arrived at Haneda Airport, but their flight reservations to New Chitose Airport had been mysteriously canceled. I couldn't understand how airline reservations could just vanish like that, but luckily, the two students were able to get on the next flight. They arrived one hour later than planned, but better late than never!

When I first met Isaiah and Xavier at the airport, their smiles left an impression on me. Even though it was a very long journey for them, they were both grinning from ear to ear, and they looked very excited about what was in store for them in Ebetsu.



Xavier (top) and Isaiah (bottom) with their host families

At the airport, when Xavier first met his host family and staff from his school, he said, “My name is Xavier, but you can call me ‘Javi.’” Xavier explained that the Spanish version of the name “Xavier” is “Javier,” and that “Javi” (pronounced *Ha-vee*) is a common nickname. “Xavier” is a long and difficult name for Japanese people to pronounce, so I thought it was very considerate of him to introduce himself by his nickname. Actually, I ended up calling him “Javi,” too.

I also noticed that Isaiah’s host brother was in a video call with someone. I looked at the screen and saw that it was Momoha, one of the students who went to Gresham High School last winter. While she was in Gresham, she made good friends with Isaiah, so she wanted to welcome him when he arrived in Hokkaido. Isaiah looked so happy to be reunited with his friend.

About a week after I met Isaiah and Xavier at the airport, I spent one full day with them and their host brothers. First, we visited the mayor. Isaiah and Xavier talked a lot about what they wanted to experience in Ebetsu. They both like shopping, so they talked about the anime goods and Japanese-brand shoes they wanted to buy. They also said they want to see traditional houses. When the mayor asked them their favorite Japanese food, Isaiah answered, “Chicken!” and got a good laugh out of everyone. Isaiah explained that he is a picky eater, so chicken is the only type of meat he can eat.



Mayor Goto, Xavier’s host brother, Xavier, Isaiah, Isaiah’s host brother, and President Tatsuta of the Ebetsu Sister City Committee

After the visiting the mayor, we went to the Ebetsu City Local History Museum. The students had many questions about the clay pots. “How were they made? What is their purpose? How were they painted?” The curator patiently answered all of their questions. I had never seen high school students so interested in

archaeology before! There was also an old hand-crank phonograph, and the curator played a record for us. The sound quality had deteriorated, but the students eagerly took videos to post on their social media.

Next, we paid a visit to the nearby Ebetsu Shrine. The chief priest welcomed us warmly with tea and Japanese sweets, and showered the students with gifts such as keychains and chopsticks. Even I received presents! The chief priest had studied abroad in California when he was younger, so he was able to speak English with the students from Gresham. We had a very interesting discussion about the differences between Shinto and Buddhism. The chief priest showed us a video of the *mikoshi*, or portable shrine. Both Gresham High School students are Mexican-American, so Xavier explained that in Mexican Catholic culture, there is a custom similar to *mikoshi*. Finally, the four young men were delighted to see the chief priest’s collection of Japanese *katana*.



Top: In front of Ebetsu Shrine

Bottom: The boys readying their swords with the chief priest

We had a wonderful time at Ebetsu Shrine, but since it was time for lunch, we headed over to a Hamburg steak restaurant called KURO~SAI~, inside of ĒBRI. “What’s ‘*hambagu*’? Is it different from a hamburger?” Isaiah and Xavier wondered. Hamburg steak is an extremely popular

Western-style dish in Japan, but you won't see it on any menus in America. The closest dishes you might see are "Salisbury steak" or "meatloaf," but these are often found in frozen TV dinners, or on school lunch or hospital menus. Therefore, they have a bit of a cheap and unappetizing image. Also, when times were hard growing up, my mom used to cook plain ground beef patties and call them "hamburg." They were really just sad, bunless, toppingless hamburgers. It wasn't until I came to Japan that I ate delicious "hamburg" for the first time.

I explained the meaning of Japanese *hambagu* to the Gresham students, and we placed our orders. Xavier and the host brothers all ordered big Hamburg steaks with cut beef steak on the side, but since Isaiah only eats chicken, he ordered a "chicken burg." This restaurant offers many kinds of sauces to top your Hamburg steak, such as demi-glace, Japanese-style, garlic, and cheese, but Isaiah, the picky eater that he is, said to the server, "No sauce, please." The server looked shocked. "Just give him some salt and pepper," I said, trying to save face. We all enjoyed our meal, even Isaiah.



Much more delicious than my mother's "hamburg"!

We shopped a bit after we ate, and then we headed to the Historical Village of Hokkaido. It is a must-visit to learn the history of Hokkaido, and it was just right for Isaiah and Xavier since they said they wanted to see traditional houses. Both Xavier and Isaiah's host brother are around 180 cm tall, so they had to watch their heads when going through doors. (I'm 176 cm, but I wasn't safe either...) In addition, it was a hot day and bugs were flying around everywhere. The Gresham students and their host brothers were chasing the bugs and trying to catch them together, so I thought that bugs must be a universal language for young boys. After walking all around the

village, we rode a horse-drawn carriage back to the entrance, and that was the end of our fun day.



Top: At the Historical Village of Hokkaido

Bottom: In the horse-drawn carriage

The next time I saw Isaiah and Xavier was at their farewell party. They expressed their gratitude to their host families and schools, and everyone shared stories about the pair's time in Ebetsu. For example, Isaiah fell in love with Don Quixote, and he went shopping there numerous times. Xavier enjoys cooking, so he prepared Mexican food with his host family. Both of them said that they want to live in Japan in the future. You know it was a meaningful experience when they say that they want to come back someday! Isaiah and Xavier, you're both welcome in Ebetsu! ★



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