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CIR's Corner

February 2025 – Issue #33



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: Stories from Gresham

From January 5 to January 15, I accompanied six junior high school students and one teacher to Gresham, Oregon, the sister city of Ebetsu. In [January 2024](#) and [February 2024](#) I wrote a detailed account of last year's trip. This month, I'm going to share three stories from this year's trip. Enjoy!

Christmas Decorations



When do you all put away your Christmas decorations? Since there are many New Year's decorations in Japan, such as *shimekazari* and *kadomatsu*, I get the feeling that Japanese people put away their Christmas decorations right away. However, we don't have any particular New Year's decorations in

America. You might have heard the song, "The 12 Days of Christmas." Traditionally, the Christmas holiday lasted for 12 days, from December 25 until January 5, so people put away their Christmas decorations on January 6. In the UK, it was even believed that leaving your Christmas decorations up past that date would bring bad luck. Americans nowadays don't really pay attention to that tradition; it's not unheard of for Americans to leave Christmas decorations up until mid to late January!

We arrived in America on January 5, so it was technically the last day of Christmas. There were still some Christmas trees up in various places, such as the airport, schools, and around the city. I took the picture on

the left while waiting for our connecting flight at the airport in Honolulu. It was warm and tropical outside, with palm trees swaying in the breeze, but inside, it was still a "white Christmas."

Winter vacation finished in Gresham on January 5, so the students went back to school on January 6. The Christmas tree in the school office hadn't been put away yet, so I took pictures of the Ebetsu students meeting their host students for the first time in front of the tree.



Classrooms

The classrooms in Gresham are pretty different from classrooms in Japan. First, there are a lot of group discussions in the American education system, so the desks are arranged in a way to facilitate talking with other students. I saw the four-leaf clover-like desk arrangement in the following photo for the first time, and I thought it was particularly interesting.



Another difference is that in American schools, teachers work in their own classrooms. There is a staff room for taking breaks, but there is no communal office full of desks and teachers at work like in Japan. You will find the teacher's desk and computer in the corner of their classroom, and teachers stay in their classroom all day. Students are the ones who move from class to class.

Since it's their own space, teachers decorate their classrooms however they like. You can learn a lot about a teacher's interests from their classroom decor. For example, the music teacher covered his walls with posters of famous musicians of all genres and generations. Some teachers make inviting and relaxing spaces for students by laying out rugs, and providing pillows, cushions, and stuffed animals. I noticed many teachers using table lamps, floor lamps, and colorful string lights in order to illuminate their classrooms instead of the harsh overhead lighting. The lights in the classrooms were kept dim and calming, but interactive whiteboards used by American teachers can be seen well even in the dark.

In addition to expressing their personal taste, there is one more reason why American teachers try to provide calming environments to students. "Neurodiversity" is a term that is gaining popularity in America recently. Students' brains and nervous systems develop in a variety of ways. There are students with autism, ADHD, and other kinds of learning and developmental differences. Therefore, teachers strive to respect these differences and create a welcoming learning environment for all students. For example, by providing carpets and cushions to sit on, and by dimming the lights, the teachers are making accommodations for students who are sensitive to hard school chairs, desks, bright lights, etc.



Gym Clothes

This year we visited two middle schools. There were many differences between the two schools, but I was especially surprised by the difference in gym clothes. At

the first school I visited, the students participated in gym class in their street clothes. We used to change into gym clothes when I was in school, so when I saw these students exercising in jeans I thought, "That looks restrictive. And don't they sweat and get smelly?" I thought a lot must have changed since I was in school.



Students wearing their street clothes (left) and gym clothes (right)

However, when I observed gym class at the second school, I saw that almost all of the students had changed into a school gym T-shirt and bottoms that were easy to move in. When I went back to the first school, I asked the principal about the difference. "This school has many low-income families," she said. "Gym clothes are a financial burden for them. Also, middle school students are too embarrassed to change in the same room. We wanted to increase participation in gym class, so we did away with gym clothes."

I see. I can definitely remember my own mother struggling to pay for gym clothes when I was in school. I also remember there were some students who were so embarrassed to change in front of others that they changed in the bathroom stall. If my school didn't require gym clothes, maybe these students would have been able to participate in PE class more freely.



It was my second time in Gresham, but I was still able to make many new discoveries. I wonder what kind of discoveries I'll make next year. ★

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