

By Sugita Mahendarkar –

Last weekend, I was given the opportunity to participate in an online cross-cultural exchange program with students from Fukuoka Chuo, a high school located in Japan's "Tokyo" of the south: Fukuoka! This was my first ever experience with any sort of exchange program and although this one would be online due to the current state of affairs, I was, nevertheless, very excited. At first, it was a bit nerve-racking to have to meet with foreign peers without knowing much about Japan or its customs and mannerisms. However, after meeting with the organizers from GPI Boston, I quickly figured out what to do and received session plans (which made everything clear and less stressful).

Soon after the meeting with GPI Boston, I joined a committee from AMSA that planned each session and organized materials and groups for the sessions. Working with my committee and planning each session was a positive and fulfilling experience, as our plans got carried out and we got to share our input with our foreign peers! For our first session, we decided to focus on our unique experiences and lives as students in Massachusetts and at AMSA. Students from AMSA compiled photos from their childhood, pictures of food and other everyday things, and even made "day in the life" videos to share! When I searched through my camera roll for my pictures and memories to share with the students from Fukuoka, I realized how different our lives were and began to appreciate things I have always considered ordinary living in New England.

Things like autumn, Dunkin Donuts, and Boston became things I was amazed and grateful for. The appreciation I felt for my ordinary life in Marlborough was one aspect of the exchange program that I had not anticipated. When meeting with kids from Japan and preparing for the sessions, I began to realize that what I considered ordinary in my life was special to someone else and should be more special to me.

Soon after, I attended the first session of our program! I gave a quick introduction to the group, telling everyone about my life in Massachusetts and my hobbies. Then I went to a breakout room with three Japanese kids and 3, including me, American kids. Here is where the fun began! We started with quick introductions and we said our names. We utilized the chat and Google Translate throughout the session, this allowed me to communicate with my foreign peers better and learn about their lives easier.

The session started with the kids from my school talking about a day in their lives and what their daily lives consisted of. We also played Two Truths and a Lie which allowed a much more casual introduction to one another! Our peers from Fukuoka chimed in throughout our presentations on our lives as students in America, commenting on our shared uniform rules at school, and the objects we showed them in our "Show and Tell" portion of the meeting. I learned the most when we had a casual conversation with each other and were able to ask each other questions on anything and everything! I learned about mentaiko, for example, a type of fish roe that can be used on dishes ranging from bread to spaghetti! Sadly, the session soon came to an end but I look forward to our second session and learning more about life in Fukuoka Chuo!