



THE JAPANESE EXPERIENCE



Hi, my name is Nathan Toll and I have just completed my first year of Bachelor of Law / Bachelor of Arts (Journalism) at James Cook University in Townsville.

I have been a Leo since my first year of high school, joining The Cathedral School Leo Club in District Q2 in March 2006. After the first Leos project I attended, my view of the Lions family and life in general, changed for the better. I went with my Leo Club – and the Easter Bunny – to a junior school to hand out Easter eggs to the children and I remember vividly the smile and hug from the first child to receive an Easter egg from me. The smiles of hundreds of children that day got me hooked on Leos and there is no way I'm stopping any time soon. I know that what the Leos do does make someone's day a lot better.

Through my years with Leos, I became very familiar with the rest of the Lions family and in 2008, I had recruited my parents who had always come along to Leos functions and supported me. Our whole family now attends most Leos and Lions events even though my sister *still* refuses to join. Doesn't stop her from coming along!



The opportunities that being in Leos has presented me are astronomical. I was an entrant in the Leo of the Year competition two years in a row and although I was not a winner, I found it to be a great confidence builder and I met so many more amazing Leos. Over the years, leadership opportunities in Leos have presented themselves to me year after year. I have held every board position my club has. In my final year of high school, I decided that I wanted to do a short youth exchange in Japan, a country I have been in love with from a young age. When I realised that I could do this through a Lions Youth Exchange, I jumped at the chance.

The thought of spending over a month in a foreign country was a little daunting at first but as soon as I boarded the flight from my hometown of Townsville to fly to Sydney, I was nothing but excited. Leos have taught me to grasp every opportunity and be enthusiastic about whatever I do.

When I arrived in Japan I was met by a travel guide who spoke very fluent English, who took me to my first host family who spoke none. However, this did not stop us from communicating, me with my three years worth of high school Japanese and them with lots of crazy hand movements and an electronic dictionary. During my six weeks in Japan, I did not feel homesick once: my Japanese hosts immediately accepted me as another member of the family and would do anything for me. Every Japanese Lion I met was exactly the same.



Youth Camp - Skiing

Over the course of my trip I stayed with many Japanese Lions. They showed me their many varied but equally interesting professions. I went to the sumo wrestler choir, junior school, high school, the taiko drum school, the udon factory, olive and mandarin plantations, a huge park that my host father – president of an engineering company – redesigned, and lots of other places. My host family did their research, discovering that Australians love theme parks, and so I was taken to four of them including Universal Studios.

Of all parts of the trip, a standout would have to be the Youth Camp that all the exchangees attended in my small district of Japan – Districts 336A and 336B. There were four Malaysian youths, an Italian, a Brazilian, a Kiwi and myself. We were all "facebook friends" within hours and had the best fun skiing, snowboarding, snowball fighting and playing ping pong.

Christmas in Japan was a huge surprise to me: it is celebrated lots in the weeks leading up to it, with many festivals and parties, but then when Christmas Eve arrived, everything stopped. I didn't have to wait long to discover why, realising that most people had gone into hibernation for the amazing day that was New Years. For days, our whole family cooked traditional Japanese food such as rice cakes only made for New Years. Because every family I went to wanted me to experience the traditional Japanese culture, I spent several days making rice cakes. This consisted of pounding the cooked rice in a huge, stone bowl with a huge, wooden mallet, before scooping it out and rolling it into hundreds of fist-sized balls. People would eat the rice cakes plain, as a savoury dish with their udon noodles, or with sweet beans stuffed inside them. In my opinion, for something so simple, they were delicious.



My last few days in Japan sort of combined into one big party: all the members of the Lions Club took time off work and came out to a farewell party at an awesome antique cafe on day one. On day two they took me to a "Nathan Sayonara" Lions meeting, and on day three they met me at the train station for breakfast, before my two host families and some of the other members that had become closest with me over the time of my trip boarded the train to Osaka with me. We spent the trip talking and joking, double checking we all had each other's contact information, Skype usernames etc, before the train stopped in Osaka and it was time to say goodbye. To be completely honest, I have never seen so many people cry at once. Even in movies. It was very emotional, saying goodbye to the people I now considered family and the prospect of seeing my own family in little more than a day.



Overall, many of the happiest and fulfilling moments of my life have come as a direct result of joining Leos, and going on youth exchange to Japan. Leos has provided me with countless outlets for leadership, experience and opportunity, and the exchange to Japan brought with it many firsts: my first time away from my family for Christmas and Mum's birthday, first time I saw snow, first time skiing and snowboarding, and the first time I considered moving to another country for good. Japan is an amazing country, with people more friendly than anywhere else in the world. It is compulsory for every student in most major cities to learn English at school, so there is always somebody around that can help you out if you are having trouble, and the amount of things to see and do is endless.



The Lions Youth Exchange Program provides such a fantastic opportunity to youth all around the world, and also to the Lions Clubs that become involved, supporting or hosting the youth exchangees. I will remember my time in Japan for the rest of my life.



*Nathan Toll
Secretary - Twin Cities Leo Club
Q2 Delegate – Leo State Council 2011*

PHOTOS: **Top** – Himeji City; **Above right** – Japanese friends at Green Tea Ceremony; **Right** – Ritsurin Garden redesigned by Nathan's host father



For further information about the Lions Youth Exchange Program, go to www.lionsclubs.org.au/ye or your local Lions Club.