



Filming Tohoku Tomo

I interviewed Wesley Julian for the January 2016 issue of the JIC's monthly newsletter in conjunction with the upcoming [JETAA Chicago Shinnenkai](#) event on January 16. Wesley Julian is the [President of JETAA Chicago](#), a Director and Producer of the documentary films [The 113 Project](#) and [Tohoku Tomo](#), as well as the Assistant Director of Public Affairs at the Art Institute of Chicago and the former Media Relations Coordinator at the JIC.

AK: Tell us a little about yourself! For instance, how did you become interested in Japanese culture and why have you made Chicago your home?

WJ: I first became interested in Japanese culture while studying abroad as a rising senior in college. Waking up my first morning in the new country and culture, a friend and I decided to go for a walk through Kyoto before starting classes. It was a cool summer morning and the sun was just rising. As we walked through the city, like many others, I was struck by the contrast of old and new, the balance between tradition and modernity. The study abroad trip lasted one month and every day I was excited to explore and dive into Japanese culture.

With my senior year starting, the professor who led the May Term, an alumnus of the JET Program, suggested I look into applying for JET given my interest in Japanese culture. I applied, was accepted, and lived and worked in Japan from 2008-2010.

In 2012, Japan once again pulled me back and led me to Chicago. I was hired as the Media Relations Coordinator at the Consulate-General of Japan in Chicago and transitioned my personal interest in Japanese culture to a professional level. Though I

have moved on from the Consulate, I still have made Chicago my home and continue to work with Japan.



*In the classroom at the start of
the JET Program in 2008*

AK: Before traveling to Japan through the JET Program, was there anything that you were unsure about before visiting a new country?

WJ: Prior to visiting Japan, I had only traveled to Canada. Crossing the Pacific and entering an entirely new culture, I was full of uncertainty. Furthermore, I had no formal education on Japanese language, history, or culture; I was blindly taking on an adventure. The uncertainty led to excitement, curiosity, and eagerness to learn.

AK: How did your perspective change about Japan upon returning home?

WJ: The JET Program allows young adults to experience real Japan, the everyday Japan that is often overlooked by pop-culture and Western minds. Living in rural Miyagi in the Tohoku region, I was able to observe and participate in localized Japanese culture and everyday life. When I returned home, my sense of what it means to be Japanese, what Japanese culture is, and this concept of 'Japan' was entirely different than when I first arrived. The JET Program allowed me the opportunity to truly connect with and experience the culture, customs, and people of Japan. This is something that has stuck with me and is a driving force of my continued connection and appreciation of the country.

AK: After living in Japan, what is something you treasure or really cherish that still lives on in you here?

WJ: On the surface, it's hospitality and polite consideration of others. Every day, my behavior and decisions are influenced by my cultural experience of living in Japan. On a

deeper level, something that I cherish is my relationship and bond with my former Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) and her family. The Sakai's are a warm-hearted, friendly family and make me feel welcome every time we see each other. I know that I have a place to call home in Miyagi.

AK: How have your experiences in the JET Program, as a Media Relations Coordinator at the Consulate, as President of JETAA, and as a director and producer of documentaries shaped who you are today?

WJ: My professional and volunteer work with the JET Program, the Consulate, JETAA Chicago and Tohoku Tomo/the 113 Project have largely shaped who I am today. Since 2007 when I first travelled to Japan on the study abroad trip, I have visited, worked, or lived in Japan every single year. A major influencer on that, of course, is the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Experiencing the events in person, losing a friend, and seeing my second home ravaged by a large-scale disaster forever altered my personal and professional life.

On a more specific level, my experiences with these organizations and projects have shaped who I am today because they have allowed me to stay connected with Japan while living in the United States. My time for living in Japan may be over, but every day I get to interact with Japan and Japanese culture through these various activities.

AK: Have there been any struggles or challenges you have faced in these positions?

WJ: Yes, there have been personal and professional struggles in these positions. Developing and maturing as a young professional requires one to struggle and overcome challenges. One particular challenge was Directing and Producing a feature-length documentary film while also working full-time in another position. The struggle was in time-management and trying to maintain a work-life balance. The challenge is that when committing to unpaid, volunteer projects -- it's a blurred line between professional and personal time. On one hand, it's a personal project and should be purely driven by passion; it shouldn't feel like work. On the other hand, it's a professional-level project that requires the same level or greater in terms of work and effort; it often times feels like work. So, the struggle is negotiating that balance and making sure you leave personal time.

AK: What is the JETAA Shinnenkai event?

WJ: The annual New Year's Shinnenkai Culture Festival, now in its 13th year, is co-hosted by the JET Alumni Association of Chicago and the Consulate General of Japan at Chicago. The marquee event is a celebration of Japanese culture and an outstanding

opportunity to learn about and experience different customs and games. [Register today](#) and [visit the event on the JETAA website](#) to learn more!



2014 Shinnenkai Event

AK: What kinds of exciting things can we expect this year?

WJ: Japanese food and drink is provided and many traditional arts and crafts will be featured, including: calligraphy, origami, ema plaques and many more. You will have the opportunity to wear kimono and play New Year's games like fukuwarai.

AK: What types of activities is JETAA involved in?

WJ: JETAA Chicago is an active chapter of JET Alumni, who aim to provide a social and professional network for JET alumni; to support the JET Program (promoting, recruiting, interviewing and preparing); to serve as a resource for alumni seeking Japan-related education and employment opportunities; and to promote Japan and its culture in our community. We accomplish this in a number of ways: hosting an annual Career Development Workshop; operating JET Information Tables at local colleges and universities; organizing social and professional networking opportunities; and sharing Japanese language and culture through events and programming. On the first Monday of every month, JETAA Chicago comes together to discuss and plan events and activities within our mission. For more information, please visit JETAAChicago.com

AK: What kind of projects are you involved in as the new Assistant Director of Public Affairs at the Art Institute of Chicago?

WJ: The Public Affairs team and I manage internal and external communications for events, exhibitions, museum policy etc. The projects I am involved in are many and varied.

AK: How do you balance this with other organizations you are involved with?

As previously mentioned, there is a real concern for active young professionals who wish to work full time and volunteer their time and talents for multiple projects and organizations. I am learning the best way to balance this by saying 'no.' It's important to realize when you cannot do something simply because there is no time. It's difficult for someone who always wants to say 'yes' and help, but it's absolutely necessary if that person is involved with a wide range of commitments.

AK: Do you have any favorite quote or piece of advice you live by and would like to share?

WJ: "The best way to not feel hopeless is to get up and do something"



With the filming crew and friends for the 113 Project