

Marlaina McElheny works at the International Affairs Division of the Hokkaido Government as a CIR and, as part of the celebration of the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Sister State Relationship between Hokkaido and Massachusetts, conducted a series of cultural exchanges classes. Read on to find out more!

## Celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Hokkaido-Massachusetts Sister State Relationship with Students in Hokkaido!

In February of 1990, Hokkaido and Massachusetts first signed the agreement to become sister states, pledging to share information and resources, and create exchanges in various fields, such as education, technology, industry, and sports. But, Massachusetts and Hokkaido share an even longer history. About 150 years ago, when the development of Hokkaido began, a delegation including prominent Massachusettsans brought the latest technologies of their age to help Hokkaido become what it is today.

In 2020, we are celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original signing. Unfortunately, all original plans have been affected by COVID-19, but, fortunately, we found ways to make things work. One thing the International Affairs Office did to mark this occasion was to have Cultural Exchange classes focusing on Massachusetts in schools all over Hokkaido. These classes had two main goals:

1. Learn about Massachusetts, and about sister-state relations in general, and
2. Begin a Pen Pal Exchange program.



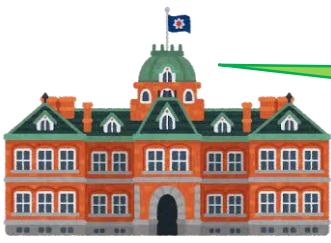
### What is a Pen Pal Exchange Program?

Pen Pals are basically defined as people who regularly write to each other, particularly via postal mail. Many schools in America, especially elementary schools, engage in this type of program where they match their class with another class or school, usually in another country, and encourage students to exchange letters.

I don't know about you, but when I was in elementary school years and years ago, my whole class participated in a pen pal exchange program. Over my years in elementary school, I participated in two pen pal exchanges that I can remember ( I have a *terrible* memory). One was with a school in South Africa, and the other was with a school in Russia, where my teacher had strong ties to the school.

The letters usually start out simple and the same way: Hello, tell me about yourself. I want to know how our lives are different, and—even more so—how they are the same, despite the distance between us.

The purpose of these letters is to connect two students or classes who would never have had the chance to connect on their own, most likely. More than that connection, these letters offer a chance to learn about another culture, another life besides your own through a first-hand experience.



Did you know, the dome at the top of the Former Govt. Bldg. was designed by Horace Capron from Massachusetts!

Eight schools responded to the International Affairs Office's call for schools. Because of COVID-19, one school did drop out, but we were able to do classes at seven schools across the 'Do: Sapporo Yamahana JHS, Kamishibetsu JHS, Nakashibetsu JHS, Kushiro Kyoei ES, Shintoku JHS, Abashiri Higashi ES, and Hakodate Minato JHS.



Due to a spike in COVID-19 cases, from the end of November, we moved our 4 remaining school visits ONLINE! Even though we couldn't meet in person, we were able to use technology to bridge the gap between us and learn new things from each other!

The students were eager to learn, and while it would have been nice to meet in person, this way we were able to stay healthy *and* participate in international exchange!

The students who participated in the classes, online and in person, learned about Massachusetts, and about what sister-city relations are. We had a quiz and the students were able to ask questions about things they were interested in. And, of course, they wrote their pen pal letters.

We received hundreds of letters from the students that are waiting to be sent to Massachusetts. Hopefully, they can make friends across the globe!





# HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT



**T**here are over 300 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. We come from all over the world and we all have a very unique experience with the island. Read on to learn more!



## Meet DeVonna!

### Brief Biography

My name is DeVonna Lauritzen and I am from Dallas, TX, USA. I became interested in Japan and its culture at a young age, and eventually majored in Japanese and Asian Studies at the University of Utah. I even completed a short study abroad in Nagoya. I am very interested in traditional Japanese culture like kimono and tea ceremony.

My family and I now live in a small coastal town called Samani in the Hidaka subprefecture, and I am a fourth year CIR.

### What brought you to Hokkaido (or Japan)?

I was interested in the JET Program for some time, but had to wait until the timing for me and my family was right before I applied to become a Coordinator of International Relations (CIR). After visiting Honshu (mainland) several times I was interested in going somewhere else and my husband was worried about the hot summers in Japan so we asked to be placed somewhere in rural Hokkaido.

### What is your favorite thing about your region?

Being surrounded by nature. My little town is tucked away in between the Hidaka Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. On quiet nights we can even hear the waves in our apartment. There are so many scenic spots to explore and several walking and hiking paths so there's almost always something to do outdoors. Brilliant pink cherry blossoms and a rainbow of flowers bloom during spring, you can see beautiful hills and mountains of lush green and the sparkling blue waves during summer, in autumn the hills turn a lovely gold color, and in winter it is blanketed in white snow.

After living in a busy metropolitan area in the US, it's been lovely to live somewhere completely different and raise my son where he can experience nature first hand.



## What are some of your favorite things to do in winter?

Sledding and bird watching. Since I work with young children at the local kindergarten, we often take the kids sledding after a good snowfall. My son also enjoys sledding and playing in the snow together. My region is also home to some special birds that migrate here for the winter like the whooper swan, Steller's sea eagle, white tailed eagle, and the long-tailed tit otherwise known as Hokkaido's snow fairy. Sometimes we will walk to the Samani River to feed the swans and try to spot the eagles in the tree tops.

## What are things that you enjoy about being a CIR on the JET Programme?

Being a CIR on the JET Program has allowed me to be involved in a variety of work. I teach English to kindergarten aged children and plan cultural events like holiday parties and cooking lessons for the townspeople. I also do translation and interpretation for the Mt. Apoi UNESCO Global Geopark which allows me to be involved in the geopark scene on a global level. Pre-COVID, I even accompanied my geopark to international conferences in Italy and Indonesia.

