

Jamaican Language Teachers Making Their Mark in Japan

Founded in 1972, Interac is Japan's largest private provider of professional foreign teachers to the Japanese government through its ALT programme.

Thirty-one year-old, Stacie Miller is among the more than 200 Jamaicans who have made the trek across the Pacific to the Eastern nation of Japan during the past 13 years, to serve as assistant language teachers.

They have travelled over 8,000 miles, cutting across cultural and language barriers to take up residence in a country which is completely different from their own. The young, talented Jamaicans are forging a path for themselves in the Far East, flying the black, green and gold high, and making a significant difference in the lives of thousands of students, as they participate in various exchange programmes, most notably the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme and the Interac programme. Ms. Miller, who migrated to Akita, Japan more than a year ago, is employed by the Daisen City Board of Education, as an assistant language teacher, where she teaches English Language at the kindergarten, primary, and junior high school levels. She tells JIS News via Facebook interview that despite the initial culture shock, she has enjoyed the experience immensely. "There have been moments when I wondered why I came to Japan, because of the differences in culture and work ethics. However, these moments are shadows in comparison to the exhilarating experiences I have had so far," she says. She notes that her experience in Japan has been worthwhile, as she has not only been able to completely immerse herself in the environment, learning about the various cultural practices and customs, but she has also promoted "Brand Jamaica". She points out, however, that the Jamaican brand is not as popular in the rural areas, as "most people in these areas have never heard of Jamaica, apart from the Olympics and Bolt". "This, therefore, means that we need to make an effort to promote Jamaica more," she says. Likewise, University of the West Indies graduate, Rochelle Mighty, shares Ms. Miller's appreciation for the experience afforded by the JET programme. Rochelle, a 28-year-old assistant language teacher in Takaoka City, Toyama says while she has had bouts of loneliness, her Japanese experience has been "surreal, interesting, and delightful". "There is a sense of fulfilment in being able to share your world with people who are both eager to learn about it, and appreciative of the "little dot" that is Jamaica," she said. "There is just so much they don't know about us, for example, our beautiful scenery and customs. They are amazed when they learn the cultural differences between Japan and Jamaica." Mrs. Mighty has been teaching in Japan for more than a year and says she would recommend the programme to any Jamaican. "The connection between Japan and Jamaica has fostered a positive relationship between the two countries. This is not only on a macro-economic or governmental level, but it's also felt in our everyday lives," she says. "I believe this programme has helped me significantly in helping to shape the people I come in contact with. I think that in being here, I have allowed many Japanese to have a fresh world view...that there are so many other people to meet, cultures to learn about, things to see and appreciate around them," Mrs. Mighty remarks. She informs that since being in Japan she has been able to promote her country and its many offerings. "I have taught Jamaican cooking classes to my students and English club. I've also talked quite a bit about culinary traditions, such as Christmas cakes, sorrel and Easter buns. Food is always one way to promote culture here and it has always gone over well, because of the differences in tastes. I have also participated in my city's cultural workshops, where I talked about Jamaican history, holidays, food, brands, cultural assets, just to name a few. I will also be participating in an International Culture Festival this month and I will work with the few Jamaicans here to prepare a booth about Jamaica. In this way, we have a wonderful opportunity to share with the hundreds of people who attend this festival every year," she says. Mrs. Mighty says she has also taught basic Jamaican language to her students and has also participated in a one hour workshop, completely dedicated to teaching patois to Japanese teachers and other ALTs. Similarly, participants in the Japanese Interac programme, Peter Kelly and Glenda-Kay Caballero, speak highly of their experiences in the Far East nation. Founded in 1972, Interac is Japan's largest private provider of professional foreign teachers to the Japanese government through its ALT programme. Interac is also a significant player in providing professional teachers for commercial and government organisations. Mr. Kelly, 29, has been living in that country for almost five years and believes his experience will help him to contribute significantly to Jamaica's development when he returns home. He now lives in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area and is employed as a Language Consultant. "When I return home, there are multiple avenues I could pursue. I have gained some degree of fluency in Japanese and have taken to Mandarin Chinese. I could be of value in the area of trade, particularly commerce, or bilateral relations, since I have not only a communications, but also a legal background," he states. Ms. Caballero, a 24-year-old graduate of the Northern Caribbean University (NCU) believes, she too, will be an asset to Jamaica when her stint in Japan is completed. "I have learned a lot since being here. I have learned so much about from the Japanese people about work ethics, effective communication, good customer service and overall care and genuine concern for the environment. I hope to use this experience in continuing to try to be an upstanding citizen of the world, impacting people by being a positive mentor and displaying

professionalism,” she says. Both the JET and Interac programmes are open to university graduates between the ages of 18 and 40 years old.