IU Junior Set to Study in Japan

Andrea Ludwig has just gotten married and now she is off to Japan for nine months. But her trip to Japan is no honeymoon—she expects to work hard, and she’s going without her husband! The 20-year-old IU Bloomington junior from Granger, Indiana, won a nine-month Exchange Program Scholarship from the AIEJ, a subsidiary organization of Japan’s Ministry of Education.

“Everybody always asks one question: ‘Why are you leaving right after you get married?’” said Andrea, who is studying Japanese language and literature and working toward a teaching certificate. “For one thing, I have planned this trip to Japan for quite a while. And I think it’s a lot better because now I don’t have to worry about trying to plan the wedding while I’m over there.”

For Andrea, the scholarship is an opportunity of a lifetime. She’s been preparing for it since high school, when she transferred schools because the high school in her area didn’t offer Japanese. A neighbor who was a translator of Japanese first got Andrea interested in Japanese language and culture. “I would babysit for her,” Andrea recalls. “When I answered the phone, people would talk to me in Japanese. So I kind of chuckled to myself and swore that one day I would learn to speak Japanese.”

Andrea finds the Japanese language and characters intriguing. “They’re like Egyptian hieroglyphics,” she says. “It’s like solving a code or puzzle, and I think that’s what makes it so much fun.”

She’s also drawn to Japanese art, particularly to Japanese wood block prints. “There’s something about the colors they use, and the simplicity of it all,” she said. “It’s just amazing.”

The scholarship pays for Andrea to participate in an IU-administered exchange program between IU and Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan. This year IU is sending two other students to Nagoya in addition to Andrea, according to Elizabeth Tilghman, admissions coordinator for IU’s Office of Overseas Study.

“(The scholarships) are used to attract American students to Japan to study, because it’s so prohibitively expensive for us to go there,” Tilghman said.

The scholarship provides a monthly stipend for housing, food, transportation and a one-time “outfit allowance” for books and school supplies. It also covers international airfare. Andrea’s tuition is covered by the Office of Overseas Study, according to Director Richard Stryker.

The Office of Overseas Study has been instrumental in helping Andrea with the application process. “The main role we played with Andrea was selecting her to go on the Nanzan exchange in the first place,” Tilghman explained. “My biggest role is helping the students with this really difficult application. The Japanese application is the most difficult application that we deal with in this office.”

Andrea is well aware of the problems she will face overseas. She is tall and blonde, so is sure to stand out in Japan. “It can draw too much attention to you,” Andrea said. “And because you are American and because you are obviously foreign, some people are intimidated by that and they won’t speak to you.” This, however, she sees as both a blessing and a curse. “It’s good in one sense because people will pay more attention to you. They consider you special, so some people may want to talk to you more.”

Andrea also anticipates having to confront homesickness. “When you’re not understanding something and you’re feeling culture shock, you just want to grab somebody and say, ‘Speak English to me,’ or ‘I want a cheeseburger! I don’t want any more fish,’” she says. But she’s confident she will be able to adjust, because she spent a summer as an exchange student in Japan when she was in high school. “I think I’m somewhat at an advantage because I have been over there before, so I have an idea what to expect.”

She’ll ward off homesickness with e-mail and audio tapes. “One thing I will definitely do this time is make cassette tapes and send them home, and have the family do the same,” she says. “It’s nice to hear somebody’s voice. It’s so much better than a letter, and you can get so much more on one 90-minute cassette tape than you can get on three pages of air mail.” She’s also looking forward to her husband visiting her during the holidays.

As for Andrea’s future plans, she hopes to teach English in Japan for a year after she earns her B.A. She then wants to return to the United States to teach Japanese, where she hopes her first-hand experience will benefit her students. “I would like to be able to bring to my future students a sense of what it’s really like over there,” she says. “I think that’s important to understand the language.”

Brian Donahoe for OIP