It Starts with People: *Building Relationships in Your Community and Workplace*

Introduction (2min timed):

[slide 1]

 Hello, welcome to this TED Talk. This speech will be about how to build strong and meaningful relationships within your community and workplace.

 To start, I want to introduce myself. Hi, my name is Carly. I am from San Diego, California, but I have called Nagasaki my home for a little over a year now. I teach at Nagasaki Technical High School and absolutely love it. The students are full of personality. One student wrote UNCHI on his name card, which means POOP in Japanese. At the time, I didn’t know the translation and spent about four months thinking this was his real name. Furthermore, my coworkers are all so kind and the greater community of Nagasaki we live in has opened my heart in many, many ways. But today, we’re not going to talk about me (minus a few personal anecdotes), instead, I will do my best to give you some ideas and motivation for connecting with the people around you.

I want to share a quote with you. It is by past American President Teddy Roosevelt. [slide 2] He said this: “The single most important ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people.” As a JET, the relationships we build are an essential part to our overall success. I was at a dinner with some first year JETs, and one of them told me at his orientation, they described two kinds of JET experiences. The first is going home and crying every night. The second is getting involved and flourishing. My goal today is to help you live out the latter scenario during your time here by offering guidance in building relationships in your community then workplace and, finally, the benefits of prioritizing people.

Talking Point 1, Community (8 min):

[slide 3]

What is community? Well, according to a quick Google search, community is a group of people living in the same place. Though, it is so much more. You can see even Winnie the Pooh is bored with this definition. It is a place you call home. Where you feel a sense of belonging, and activities are carried out together. A place where ideally everybody lives by a common creed to see what is best for the people and place they live in. Experts on creating strong communities say, “it exists by proximity and knows faces. It has trust and understanding.” (museumtwo.blogspot.jp). In sum, a community needs us to know each other. To meet and not exist in separate, fragmented worlds. [slide 4] Like Winnie Pooh and his friends! Sure, we are automatically a part of the JET community…. [slide 5]

 …so, how can we become a part of the greater community in Nagasaki? Answering this question is vital to thriving as a JET. My suggestions are that we can one, get involved; and, two, say ‘hello,’ or こんにちは.

[slide 6] Ideas for getting involved include volunteering, joining local events, writing for the Nagazasshi, taking lessons, becoming a member of a gym, sports team, band, taiko drumming group, or yosakoi dance team. The list is essentially limitless. The examples bolded are the ones I will speak about in detail.

[slide 7] As for volunteering, this can mean taking up opportunities when presented with them by our Nagasaki Pas, seeking out volunteer jobs outside of school, or helping out after classes with your students’ extracurricular activities. Again, this list is not limited.

[slide 8] The Nagasaki PAs have hosted some really awesome events encouraging intercultural exchange. (and, no, they are not paying me to say this!) At the end of this month, the JET programme has its own floor at the Nagasaki International Festival. It is a great chance to share our cultures and connect with the people of Nagasaki. If you couldn’t sign up to volunteer in time, I encourage you to stop by this event. These sort of volunteer opportunities are offered by our area representatives throughout the year and are an easy way to get involved, connect with others living in Nagasaki, and create meaningful experiences during your time here.

[slide 9] If you are interested in a consistent volunteer job, I can highlight a few organizations. The first is at Myoujouen Children’s Home. It is an orphanage where second year ALT, Mel, volunteers every Monday. The second is at Inoue Hospital where I help facilitate English conversation to improve doctors and nurses’ English speaking abilities every Wednesday.

[slide 10] Although new volunteers are not being taken at this time, Mel said there may be a chance to volunteer in the future or one of their other locations. In any case, I want to share what she says about her experience. She said, “I feel so lucky I get to be a part of their lives. It doesn’t just affect them positively, it does me, too. I also teach some of them at my school so it’s good because they come to trust and like me more.” This shows how volunteering in the community doesn’t only help others, it has a huge impact on us having rewarding experiences as well.

[slide 11] I have a similar sentiment toward the Inoue staff. The volunteering, though, is a bit different. It’s very casual. We open a few bottles of wine, eat chips, and have relaxed conversation. All are welcome, and it’s a good way to network with English-speaking medical staff. I love going because it makes me feel close to the people that serve Nagasaki. If you are interested in joining, please copy down my email address at the end of the presentation and/or come talk to me during the conference.

[slide12] The last thing I want to talk about as for volunteering is helping with your students’ extracurricular. Ask your coworkers in charge of the sport or club you want to join if it’s okay to help out. More than often, they will welcome you. One important lesson I have learned while wanting to get involved is this: don’t be afraid to ask. I joined the volleyball team for a while, and it helped me to bond with my students and the volleyball coach quickly, naturally, and it was really fun!

[slide 13] Shifting gears a bit…. joining local events is another way to feel a part of your community and closer to its people! My friend, Dominic, is a second year ALT in Tsushima and he was invited to carry a みこし, or portable shrine, as a part of his town’s local festival. He invited his JTE and together they took turns carrying this shrine. Dom says, “It was great meeting lots of other young people in my community…and my students were really surprised to see us carrying the shrine! Carrying a みこし　is perhaps not something a lot of ALTs get to do, but I recommend that everyone take the opportunity to do things that let you get involved in the community.”

[slide 14] Continually, it is important to say “hello” or こんには. Your community includes the people you meet in izakayas, the conbini, those you see on your commute to work, workers in restaurants or cafés, or anywhere else outside of and including your work and home.

 Saying “hello” is an easy task that goes a long way. If you lean towards being shy, just remember you being here as a foreigner automatically makes you 100 times more interesting and people truly want to talk to you! When we are friendly to others, it means more than we can measure, and it sends the message to people that we are open, approachable, and wanting to embrace the world around us. This creates more chances for the people around us to feel comfortable and willing to reciprocate. In my experience, this almost always results in unpredictable kindness and closes the gap between living as an individual and living as a community.

For example, I look forward to my walks home from work because I get to visit my favorite little four year-old and his grandfather. They stop at Lawson’s on their way home at the same time I’m passing it. Both are quite shy, but me and the boy bonded over our common affection for a cat who always sat outside the conbini. Since then we engage in small conversations and, one day, they presented a small candy to me along with some flowers. Such a small gesture would have never happened if I didn’t decide to be friendly to the boy or his grandfather beyond petting the conbini cat.

 These moments are what make this programme so special. As a JET, it is essential to connect with the people in our communities to create a sense of unity, for stronger relationships, for understanding, and for making memories we will hold dear beyond our time in Nagasaki.

Talking Point 2, Workplace (3 min):

[slide 15] What is the nature of the workplace? We think by nature it is simply a place where working professionals show up, do their job, and return home. But what I want to propose is that, simply put, it is another community. Which goes back to my last point-a community acknowledges each other, functions together to accomplish more, and supports one another. As a part of the work community, we should strive to foster vibrant relationships in the workplace.

[slide 16] Many of our coworkers want to talk to us, but because of their English ability may be nervous to speak to you. It means a lot if you take the first steps to show you want to connect with them, too. Some suggestions I have are: share snacks/food, have conversations during lunch, share photos from home or travels, talk to your JTEs and others, go to enkais, and say YES to invitations you receive.

[slide 17] Third year ALT and PA, Renea, told her story to me about sharing food. She explained the teachers around her age, and single, are not usually able to do much home cooking as they work long hours and there is no one there to cook for them. Whenever she made a large amount of food she would take it to school and share it with the teachers that she knew would appreciate some home cooked food. Every once in a while, she’d invite them to come to her place for dinner. After which, they’d relax with face masks. She said, “I had the chance to share a part of my culture (with the style of food) and spend time with teachers away from the workplace. Through these dinners I got to know the teachers a lot better and it transferred over to the staffroom.” This bond even led them to go to Huis Ten Bosch together, as you can see in this picture!

[slide 18] Similarly, Anthony, a second year Shinkamigoto ALT was able to make a friendship out of lunchtime conversation. He met his fishing buddy, Nishikido-sensei simply by sitting with him during lunch. They had similar interests, so they traded phone numbers, and used google translate to communicate. They organized to go fishing and, next he introduced him to Friday night soft tennis. He’s met more people there and they see each other often shopping or at school events. Though, Nishikido was moved to a different school, they still stay in contact and visited each other over summer.

[slide 19] These stories show us how important it is for JETs to bond with people in the workplace to create a comfortable, thriving work environment and lasting friendships. When I wanted to connect to my colleagues more, I decided to organize an enkai. The people who signed up to go were absolutely enthralled to go. It was just my way of saying “I want to spend time with you” and “I appreciate you.” Find your way of expressing this, and your workplace will begin to feel more like a strong community.

Talking Point 3, Benefits of Prioritizing Relationships (1min 40sec)

[slide 20] Now that we have covered the importance of building community ties in and outside the workplace, I want to touch on the benefits of this exchange. They include: guidance, mentorship, invitations, beating homesickness, improving Japanese language skills, maintaining mental and physical well-being, as well as creating a greater understanding of cultures.

As someone new to the country, we sometimes need guidance in everyday life. Last month I suffered an allergic reaction and needed to go to the emergency room around 11pm. As someone who doesn’t speak Japanese fluently, I was lucky to be able to reach out to a Japanese friend of mine to take me and, later, my JTE met me at the hospital and allowed me to stay over at her apartment. She made hot tea and made sure I went to sleep without any severe medical complications. I was super grateful for the help, and was humbled to have people in my life who cared for me like that.

In return, the people we meet appreciate our openness and willingness to share who we are culturally and as individuals. From this, we can gain dear friends who will invite us to unique outings, and these new friends’ company by nature helps with homesickness. When you have good people to spend time with here, it alleviates missing home. I personally find writing postcards helpful, too. In any case, I digress. With those friends, you can practice Japanese. Whether they are Japanese or non-Japanese, most everyone you meet here will have fluency or be learning as well!

Continually, a recent study on wellbeing found one of the best ways to improve it is to surround ourselves with good people. As humans, we are social beings. Even the biggest of introverts need to be around people sometimes! I can sympathize with that. So, I urge you to nurture your relationships while you are here. It will make way for greater cross-cultural understanding and leave your experience with the JET program colorful and unforgettable.

Conclusion (40sec):

[slide 21] It all starts with people. The relationships you will make during your time here will be something to cherish when it’s time to leave...if or when you *do* decide to return home. It is important we strive to bond with our community and people in our workplace so that we can gain cross-cultural understanding and do our best to make lasting positive impressions in our new home. So please, enjoy participating in the community, get involved, volunteer, spend time with students, join local events, say “hello,” talk with coworkers. Before I end, I would like to finish with a quote from Winnie the Pooh. “A little thought for others makes all the difference.” Thank you for listening.

[slide 22]