

## “Out of the Box” Experience

The precise architectural details on the walls of Tokyo Jamii, a mosque and Turkish culture center in the heart of Tokyo, glowed luminously. The dazzling sunlight seeped through the geometric patterned stained-glass windows. The color variations and decorations enchanted me when I visited this spring. Truthfully, having never visited a mosque, I was skeptical of the possibility of breaking a certain rule and wondering how a “tourist” like myself could actually be allowed inside such a sacred place. However, the warmth and the welcoming ambience I felt once inside, quickly put me at ease. People smiled cordially, not a single glint of hostility in their eyes. Little did I know, there was something far beyond the mesmerizing Islamic architecture and the cordial smiles of those I passed.

The tour guide, a jolly Japanese man, generously led me around the building. He explained to me that despite Tokyo Jamii being a Turkish center, people from many countries visit the mosque, although most people live far away. However, a transfer student, one of the many people he introduced me to, added that the distance did not bother them because coming to the mosque gave them the opportunity to talk to their fellow Muslims.

The thought of hundreds of people going to the mosque every week, connecting with other people from different countries and spending their time together left me awestruck. The

fact that I was never aware that a community filled with so much love that allowed people with Islamic background and Japanese people to interact, existed in a place, never too far out of reach shocked me.

As my tour guide continued to show me around, he told me of his trip to Egypt as a university student and how this had taken him to a completely different path than what most Japanese people would even consider attempting. He explained how during his trip to Egypt, he experienced the hospitality of many locals. He recounted how he was intrigued when he had learned that they were Muslims and how this experience had shaped him to become the person that he is proudly today: a Muslim himself.

During our time together, I asked him what he values most about being a Muslim. I still remember vividly how he had replied, saying how the importance of equality in Muslim teaching is something that he continues to hold close to his heart. He explained how during prayers, Muslims lineup in one row to signify that under God, everyone is equal, and how one's value does not differ because they are a particular race. He expressed frustration towards the prejudice towards Islamic culture and Muslims that Japanese people have due to their lack of knowledge.

However, a moment later, he smiled, then said that I had given him a sense of reassurance and courage to continue his mission to tell the truth of Islamic culture. He told me

he was surprised that a high school student would ever willingly come to the Tokyo Jamii, interested in Islamic culture but he was most of all delighted and encouraged to know that people do care. The hour and a half that he spent showing me around the mosque, made me realize that he was not just a tour guide, but a passionate cultural ambassador whose life's work is to eradicate such prejudice against Islamic culture.

Being a high school student, I am often asked what I have in mind for my future. To my own dismay, I always find myself replying that I am not sure. However, my trip to Tokyo Jamii gave me a glimmer of hope. My interaction with the transfer students and listening to my tour guide share his valuable experiences encouraged me to be open to change and to think outside the box. It may just lead me to something unexpected that could broaden the possibilities of my future. However, like my tour guide whose opportunity to interact with the locals during his trip to Egypt had been the catalyst to his current path, I have realized that these unexpected twists and turns in life, are linked significantly with the people and communities one meets and interacts with along the way. [698 words]