

Discovering the Neighborhood

How far away from home would you need to be to experience a new culture? Not a lot of people would say that an adventure could easily take place in their neighborhood. But for me, adventure is just around the corner. You might be guessing that I live in a multicultural community. Well, you've got me wrong. Actually, I live in Omiya, which is located in Saitama Prefecture of Japan. And my story is about what I discovered about myself and my local culture.

About a year ago, I was the typical example of how younger generations don't care much about traditional culture. Even after 15 years of living in Omiya, I didn't know anything about its bonsai culture. My first visit to the Omiya Bonsai Village was with my parents.

I felt a sudden strangeness while walking through the historic village after so many years of living nearby. After that my parents and I would go back once or twice a month to walk around. But since I had never paid attention to my local culture, I couldn't see what made it charismatic or special right away. My lack of cultural understanding bothered me a lot. So I began reading books and articles about bonsai and sometimes visited The Omiya Bonsai Art Museum. A couple of months passed and I had reached a very basic level of cultural awareness. Although I was still a beginner, it felt good when I could tell the differences between various bonsai styles or shapes. I started learning through actual experience when I started volunteering at The Omiya Bonsai Art Museum. My job was to assist professional bonsai gardeners in workshops. This was a really refreshing way to learn about bonsai and the village. Every workshop made me think about what I could do to make the most out of my experiences.

Suddenly my inner dialog was like, "wow, I've changed a lot." And I didn't want to miss this moment in which I was so prepared to take action. So then I wrote articles and reports about what I had learned through volunteer work and shared this information with my family and friends. And as you might expect, they were surprised by my enthusiasm for bonsai. More and more people read my articles and gave me feedback. Some even reached out to me through mutual friends.

Connecting with people came with questions that made me dive deeper into the bonsai community. And then I heard that inner dialog again, “How have I come this far?”. I organized a bonsai workshop and interpreted for a foreign student. I put together bonsai starter kits for 20 international students. And I’m now organizing an event for exchange students in cooperation with members of my local Rotary International Club.

Pretty good story right? But it’s not just a story. I’ve done more than just develop respect and understanding towards the bonsai community. I’ve become a part of my local culture and helped others take away the most from their experiences. I’ve made supportive and inspiring friends both inside and outside of the bonsai community. And last but not least, I’ve noticed my inner dialogue becoming more positive and self-encouraging.

I would’ve never thought that the culture in Omiya could take me from cultural apathy to activism. It was really incredible to notice how a small town I had grown up near had so much to offer to me and my community. My local culture helped me find a purpose to take action and make a difference. I learned that when we take action, we find people and people find us. And that’s just what made me a better and happier person. For that, I love my traditional culture and local community for giving me an adventure. I’m happy to call this place my home. [637 words]