



NEWS

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MTA MARKETING MARVEL DEDICATES LIFE TO TEACHING JAPANESE LANGUAGE AND ROOTS TO KIDS AT LONG BEACH COMMUNITY CENTER

When Thomas Amiya entered adolescence he experienced a rather early mid-life crisis. It wouldn't be until the MTA marketing communications officer visited his grandparents in Japan at age 15 that the answer to his inner-question, "Who Am I?" would be provided.

More than one decade after this cathartic experience, the new Thomas Amiya, 27, believes his main calling in life is to teach the kindergartners attending the Long Beach Japanese Language School at the Harbor Japanese Community Center in Long Beach, which he attended as a child, the Japanese language and culture. At the center, a one-time heart of the local Japanese society, Thomas' strongest emphasis is on all the sacrifices their parents and ancestors made when they immigrated to the U.S and made Long Beach their new home. Ironically, three of the teachers who taught Thomas still teach there.

"If you lay an early foundation for the children chances are they will want to attend the school and not because their parents want them to," says Thomas, raised in Long Beach until he was 3 years old but who now resides in Cerritos.

One day Thomas hopes to write an Alex Haley-style version of his *roots* and 3-month voyage of self-discovery to Japan in 1985, which forever changed his life and perspective, but today the *nisei* (second generation Japanese-American), is content just being a *sensei* (teacher) every Saturday for six hours.

"This is going to sound hokey," says the young man in charge of the MTA Internet website who is planning to develop a Japanese culture website," but this has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life."

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The son of Toshiaki and Yoshiko, first generation immigrants who moved to the U.S. in the early 1950s, Thomas hopes the kids in his classroom will never lose sight of their Japanese heritage, however, that's exactly what happened to him. From age 10, until he graduated from high school, the subject, he says, had become "boring and a chore."

"I was always doing my Japanese homework late on Friday night, or studying for a test in the car on the way to school."

The reawakening took place shortly thereafter when Thomas traveled to Japan and stayed with his grandparents and aunts.

It was then that Thomas realized his Japanese language skills had eroded and that years of history lessons had been forgotten.

"That woke me up," says Thomas. "If I'd kept up my skills all those years, I could have understood and learned a lot more."

After that experience, and through several other trips to Japan, Thomas decided to make more of a concerted effort to develop his language skills. He began reading Japanese books and magazines, watching Japanese TV and movies. While enrolled at UC Irvine, where he double-majored in biological sciences and the Japanese language, he became an assistant teacher at the Long Beach Community Center and four years later a full-fledged instructor.

Though he expresses a deep admiration for his former instructors, Thomas says his teaching style is a little more easy going.

"When I attended the school we didn't have a choice. So instead of coming on too strong, my goal is for the children to embrace the Japanese language and culture but to really enjoy it at the same time."

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