

Growing Together At a Cultural Summer Camp

By Cara Kuroda

“Growing Together” are two words that sit below the Medaka no Gakko logo. I have looked at that logo for years, beginning when my older son began attending the Medaka no Gakko summer camp in Palo Alto over 4 years ago. Being a part of a cultural summer camp such as Medaka no Gakko has unfolded a deeper understanding of that one line and of the importance of learning about cultural heritage.

Today’s cultures are diverse and one’s nationality is often multifaceted. This lends to an even more important role for cultural summer camps in our children’s world. The mission of Medaka no Gakko is: to convey the customs, values, aesthetics and approach to life of the Japanese heritage. The classroom environment is designed to encourage and guide children in the development of a self-image. Learning about the whole or fractional part of one’s culture can play such a huge role in forming a *whole* self-image. Medaka no Gakko’s curriculum teaches rich hands-on learning within the areas of art, music literature, cooking, social studies, language and history.

Through literature, children learn about classic Japanese children’s folklore in the lower grades to the history of Japanese-American internment during World War II in the upper grades. Cooking is always a highlight each summer. The children are in the kitchen preparing Japanese dishes they might have never eaten before and now love. Their palates expand as they grow. The children learn Japanese through writing and song and learn how some of the *kanji* (written characters) are formed. A former student and teacher at Medaka no Gakko, Sydney Shiroyama, describes her experience at Medaka no Gakko:



“Exploring the customs, food and crafts of Japan at Medaka no Gakko allowed me to understand the richness and beauty of cultural diversity. From an early age, I understood that Japan is one of many countries different than my own. Throughout Medaka no Gakko, there was never a sense that any country is better or worse, only that cultural awareness is fun and interesting. This attitude helped me foster a curiosity of other cultures that I carry with me today. While becoming familiar with Japan, I was eager to learn about other countries and *very* excited to travel.

Being half-Japanese myself, Medaka no Gakko gave me a greater understanding of my family’s history, and a sense of pride for who I am. I felt more confident with the knowledge gained at Medaka no Gakko, and more empowered to share my culture with my friends. Due to my interest sparked by Medaka no Gakko, I continued to explore

aspects of Japanese culture in college and beyond. While at UCLA, I joined a taiko performance group and eventually moved to Japan for two years to teach English.”



Growing together sharing cultural stories.
Open House display of camper's projects.

Sydney Shiroyama and Terence Kitada are two examples of Medaka no Gakko alumni that began attending Medaka no Gakko as children. They attended camp throughout the elementary grades K-6 then served as middle school *senpai* (what is now *Senpai no Gakko*, teacher/counselor in training program) during their middle school years, and continued to serve as *senpai* in the classrooms during their high school years. Confidence and teaching skills gained through these experiences influenced both Sydney and Terence to teach English in Japan for a few years following college. The opportunity to rise up in leadership roles through the summer camp years is a unique aspect that Medaka no Gakko offers. It is with this extended experience that children literally “grow together” with the Medaka no Gakko program. Terence Kitada describes his Medaka experience:

“As middle school *senpai*, I felt like I could be a role model to younger students. My fondest memory of being a *senpai* was playing with the students during recess.

I was the first *senpai* placed in Nancy Sato's classroom. This experience planted the seeds that would later sprout into my career as an educator. Nancy Sato's exciting curriculum and unbridled enthusiasm for teaching are two qualities that I try and emulate in my high school classroom.

Medaka was definitely a key part of my decision to enroll in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. Although Medaka introduced me to many facets of Japanese life, I found myself wanting to live in my father's country and learn the language. One of the main benefits of teaching at a Japanese school after attending Medaka was that I was already familiar with some of the daily routines. For example, I knew how to do *taiso* (morning exercises), help with after-school cleaning, and participate in events like *undokai* (sports day). Many of the values of Medaka are also

essential in a Japanese workplace and classroom. Japanese teachers focus on ideals such as: cooperation, courtesy and respect.

I am honored to be returning to Medaka as a teacher for the third year. As someone who went through the program, served as *senpai*, and returned as a teacher, I feel as though I have a unique perspective; I have seen this program from every angle, and each time my appreciation for it grows. My hope is that I can provide the young students of the Bay Area peninsula with the same unique curriculum and cultural experience that I was fortunate enough to have as a young student.”

There is something special about children reuniting every summer to learn more about a part of their culture, its history and traditions. It forms an unspoken bond of acceptance between students and the larger community of camper and teacher families. “Growing together” in cultural understanding, as students and friends through the years, has a life-long positive influence.