

LEARNING JAPANESE IS A KEY TO MY FUTURE

By Meredith Maimono

There are many keys in a person's life. There is the key to one's home, the key to one's heart, and the key to understanding one's world. However, the last key can be an enigma, because the key to understanding the world comes from understanding its different cultures.

Some might argue that all people are the same, because they are born, grow up, and pass on. Although that is true, that point of view overlooks the fact that the unique character of a person's life is defined by their culture- the attitudes, values and behaviors that are expressed in a people's language. The study of foreign language is my way of understanding the world. The study of Japanese is how I understand my world, my family and myself, because I am *yonsei*, fourth generation Japanese-American.

Studying Japanese has taught me about differences between Japanese and American culture. For example, Japanese people are more indirect than Americans. Americans may raise their voice or stress a word in a sentence to show how they feel; Japanese keep their voices neutral and change the structure of the sentence to emphasize their point. At home, I speak Japanese with my grandmother, who speaks Japanese fluently. When I speak with her, I feel as if I am unlocking a piece of my culture. She teaches me about key phrases in Japanese, like "*shikata ga nai*" (meaning "It cannot be helped") which illustrates the Japanese cultural norm of accepting and enduring fate with dignity, when circumstances are beyond their control, such as Japanese-American incarceration during World War II.

I also use Japanese at the Long Beach Japanese Community Center, which serves as a place for people of all backgrounds to gather and experience aspects of Japanese culture. Through the Center, I have learned about the history and contributions of Japanese-Americans. At the Center, I also participate in the annual summer festival, where I do *odori* (Japanese dancing) and watch *kendo* (martial arts), *judo* (martial arts), and *taiko* (Japanese drum) exhibitions. All of these things are taught at the Center as a way to preserve Japanese culture.

Learning Japanese will also help me achieve my goals. I hope to study the source and spread of disease and how ethnicity, geography, diet, and culture affect them. I especially hope to focus on cross cultural trends between Japanese people in Japan, Brazil, Hawaii, and the American mainland. Learning Japanese will enable me to communicate with colleagues and patients and will allow me to study Japanese textbooks, reports, and histories first hand.

Studying Japanese is one of my keys to unlocking the cultures of the world. By learning Japanese and expanding my understanding of Japanese culture, I will be better able to promote intercultural understanding as a leader in both the medical and the Japanese-American communities. Learning Japanese is an important key to me, because it unlocks parts of my future, my culture, and my world.