

Matthew Harley, UWF student from Pensacola, visited Pensacola's sister city, Gero, Japan, March 6 – 10, 2010 as the winner of the first Japanese Speech Contest held at UWF Japan House December 5, 2009. This trip was made possible through a donation made by Mr. and Mrs. Tsuneji Taguchi. Mr. Taguchi, who served as superintendent of the Hagiwara School Board, has been involved in the Pensacola/Gero sister city project since 1993. Additional support for the trip to Gero was provided by the Board of Education of the City of Gero.

While in Gero, Matt enjoyed a home stay experience with a host family, following the family routines in the family home. He toured the UNESCO World Heritage Site Shirakawago Village in the Ryohaku Mountains, and the city of Takayama. Matt had "hands on" experience teaching English to Japanese middle school students at Gero Junior High School and attended the school's graduation ceremony. Each year, students from junior high school in Gero come to Pensacola for their annual cross-cultural exchange and study program sharing culture with students at Brown Barge Middle School in Pensacola.

On March 9 Matt toured the City of Gero and delivered a message from Pensacola Mayor Michael Wiggins to Gero City Mayor Makoto Nomura. A special ceremony was held in Matt's honor and was attended by Mayor Nomura, Mr. Taguchi, representatives from Gero City Board of Education, and the entire Gero City council. Afterwards, Mr. and Mrs. Taguchi welcomed Matt into their home for a visit.

Some photo highlights of the trip:

Matthew Harley and Gero City Mayor Makoto Nomura published in the City of Gero newspaper.

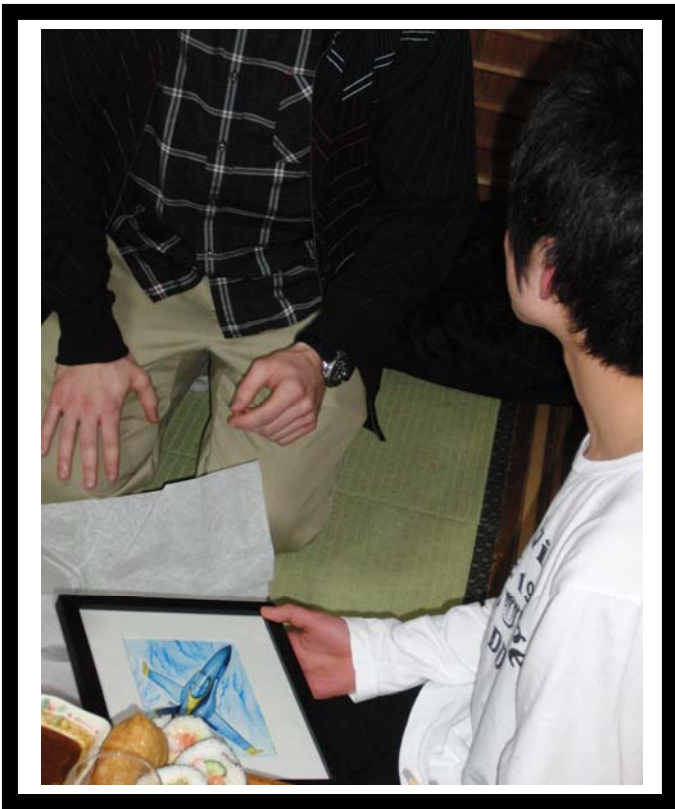


The Kaneko family – Matt's host family.



Exchanging small gifts is a Japanese custom.





Dining table at the Kaneko family home.

UNESCO World Heritage Site Shirakawago Village



Gero Junior High School



Snow in March



Images of Gero





A note from Matthew Harley

My spring break was seasoned with a four day journey to Pensacola's sister city of Gero, Japan; a unique and wonderful experience that I will not soon forget. It is certainly true that Japan has four distinctive seasons; while during my stay it was cold and snowy, the pleasant and warm-hearted locals certainly made it easy to get accustomed to the spirit of tradition within Gero and the surrounding area. During my visit, Gero officials and my host family took me to a traditional Japanese village, one of Gero's famous onsens, nearby Edo-era streets lined with traditional shops selling local products such as sake, miso and handcrafted wooden goods, restaurants serving local cuisine such as Hida beef, and city official's offices. In addition, I met with the mayor of Gero, members of the city council, and helped teach an English lesson to a group of middle school students who will visit Pensacola later this year. Throughout my tour I was stunned by the sheer beauty of the local mountains and nature; a pervasive element in a city nestled within a valley encircled by majestic mountains.

While my time in Gero was brief, it would certainly be an understatement to state to how much I learned from this experience. I now undoubtedly have a better picture of life in Japan, and caught sight of what it takes to teach English to Japanese firsthand. As studying to become bilingually proficient, I am more than ever determined to continue fostering mutual appreciation between the U.S. and Japanese. I wholeheartedly encourage others to visit Gero; a unique Japanese immersion experience that one will not regret.