My Okinawan Language

Himeru Tamashiro

When I was little I was embarrassed by my dialect and accent.
I was brought up by my parents and grandmother before I went to elementary school.
They usually spoke in the Okinawan language, especially my grandmother.
So, I spoke a mix of Japanese and Okinawan.

My grandma is from Komesu in the south of Okinawa.
I really love her so I used to follow her around but also I often fought with her.
Whenever I did something naughty, she would call me やなわらばー
やなわらばー that means you're a bad kid but this word includes love as well as anger.
I grew up hearing this word from my grandmother and it became a familiar part of my childhood.

But I moved to an other community when I entered elementary school.
The kids there didn't speak the Okinawan language and they didn't understand it.
I was surprised and I felt embarrassed.
I spoke the Okinawan language without realizing.
I thought it was Japanese.
The other students often said to me, your intonation is weird and what do you mean by this word, or that word.
I didn't want others to think I was weird and I started to think that speaking Okinawan language made me uncool.

I decided not to speak the Okinawan language anymore.
I stopped speaking it at school and tried to act more like a city kid.
but I still spoke it at home.
When I stopped speaking the Okinawan language, I also started to change my personality .
But I still spoke the Okinawan language with my grandma because it felt more comfortable and natural than speaking to her in Japanese.

When I became a high school student I started working at a local restaurant.
I had a Myanmar coworker.
She often told me about her country's culture.
She is proud of her identity so that made me think about my own roots.

We are still friends Sometimes I teach her Okinawan words and she gets excited.

She uses Okinawan words with customers and other coworkers and
that reminds me of the time I spent living with my family.
Seeing her enjoy using Okinawan words makes me feel happy and proud.

Since I entered this university I have had lot of opportunities to learn about foreign cultures and different communities.
So, I thought I'm learning about someone else's culture but do I know my own culture?
I started to remember my culture again, I remembered my dialect first.

I had an opportunity to make a video called the Okinawan secret for my English communication class.
For the video, I filmed myself talking with my grandmother in the Okinawan language.
When I showed the video to my classmates, some of them said That's amazing!
Others asked me to teach them more about the dialect.

I was surprised by their reactions.

To me, these words were just normal words I heard at home. But to them, they were interesting words they wanted to learn.

For the first time, I began to see my grandmother's language in a different way.
The language I had once tried to hide was something I could now share with others.

Now, I'm proud of the Okinawan language because it is a part of me.
Learning about other cultures helped me learn more about my own.
I learned that the things we feel shy about may be important parts of who we are.
Sometimes we just need to see them in a new way to understand their value.
I'm thankful to my family for teaching me the Okinawan language.
I'm also thankful to the people I met who helped me see its value.
From now on, I want to keep learning Okinawan and sharing it with others.