

A personal point of view...

Families Living Across the Globe

Neighbours and friends help families to grow and thrive, wherever they call home.

CINDY GRAHAM

As the plane descended on its final approach, I could just make out the patchwork of rice fields on the ground below. It had been more than 26 hours since I had left home to come to Japan, and as the wheels touched down, it hit hard: *my life was changing dramatically*.

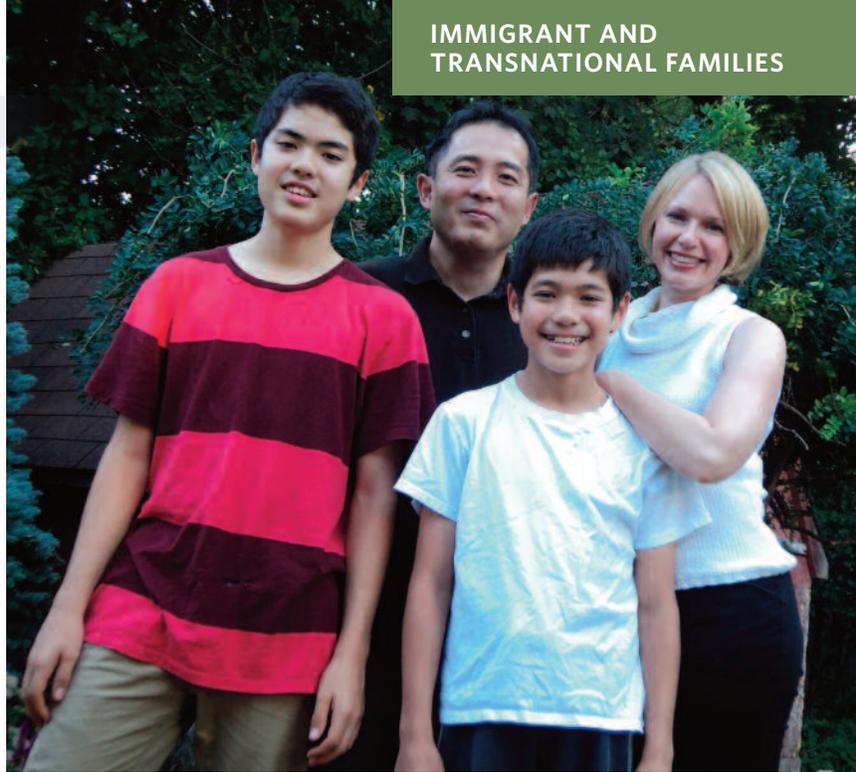
My parents had sensed it at the airport a day earlier in Halifax. In my 23 years, I had never seen my father cry, and that image was hard to shake as flight after flight took me further from my birthplace in rural Nova Scotia. Within two hours of landing on Okinawa, I started a new job as an English teacher. Within a month, I met the man who would become my future husband.

Over the next 12 years, as I married and had children in Japan, the distance took hold as nieces and nephews grew up without knowing me well. The inevitable change that comes to all communities, noticed on my yearly visits home, amplified the disconnect.

We eventually settled in Tokyo, a three-hour flight from Okinawa, my husband's hometown. He, too, experienced the guilt that can come when you are the only sibling to leave home and family behind. We needed to find a way to feel connected and included in our respective family celebrations, milestones and traditions. We also wanted to make sure our families felt connected to us.

Most people living apart from loved ones use technology for these very purposes. For my husband and me, however, the advantages of instant communication with our respective families are untested, as neither has bought a computer. Thus, communicating with telephone calls, cards, letters and photos – *the traditional ways of keeping in touch* – are all the more important.

Yearly visits, both to Nova Scotia and Okinawa, were a priority and helped narrow the gap that our time apart had



The Graham-Kinjo family at home in Ottawa, Canada.

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created. Touching base with the past by enjoying the food, people and places of our childhood while laughing and reminiscing over sibling rivalries and teenage escapades helped us reconnect. These are the memories we reach for when we need to connect emotionally to the place we used to call home.

Now back in Canada, though settled in Ottawa, I can make more frequent visits to *my* family, but we have not been able to visit my husband's family in years. With our parents getting older, the sense of guilt has increased. Part of the solution, aside from keeping in touch, has been to maintain a dialogue with our families back home about *how* we can play a role at present and in the future from where we are now. On visits back home, making sure we get to know those who are a constant in our families' lives – the neighbours and friends they see almost every day, their *families of choice* – shows that we are invested in our loved ones' emotional well-being, even though we cannot always be physically present.

We have been lucky. Our families respect our decisions to live in other countries; we know whether in Nova Scotia, Okinawa or Ottawa, friends, neighbours, siblings and relatives are an integral and important part of all our lives. Maintaining connections to family is critical for our peace of mind, especially when we cannot be there physically. We are grateful for the special neighbours our parents have coffee with every week, close friends who care for their family pets when they go on vacation and relatives to provide care if and when needed. They all help us do what families do, which is grow and thrive wherever we call home. ♡

Cindy Graham is a professional writer living in Ottawa.

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