

# **Emily Mitchell's Journey of Discovery to Hiroshima, Part 1**

## ***Emily Mitchell's Journey of Discovery***

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 12, 2008)

You are about to experience a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to travel with an impressionable yet mature for her age young lady. I first met Emily Mitchell when she came to speak to the Oak Ridge Breakfast Rotary Club after being selected as a Cultural Ambassadorial scholar in the fall of 2006, when she traveled to Quito, Ecuador to study Spanish for three months. I then became aware of her excellent writing skills by reading her e-mails and blog telling of her experiences while on the scholarship.

When I learned she was planning a trip to Hiroshima, I immediately approached her about writing a journal of her trip to be published in *Historically Speaking*. She agreed.

Let me introduce Emily Mitchell to you. She is studying at the University of South Carolina, and in May will receive a Bachelor of Arts with a major in Religious Studies and Mathematics, and a minor in Spanish. She plans on eventually going to graduate school to pursue a PhD in Mathematics. Next year, however, she will be in Guatemala, volunteering with the San Lucas mission.

This assignment is part of her Senior Thesis Project. In order to graduate from the Honors College, each student must complete a major project, which can be anything from scientific research to writing a novel. Emily chose to focus her project on the history of the Manhattan Project, and her connection to the atomic bomb through Oak Ridge.

Emily's mother is Peggy Mitchell. She was born in Loretta, KY in 1942 and moved to Oak Ridge in 1954. After moving to several different places, she returned to Oak Ridge in 1969 and has lived here ever since.

Emily's father, Toby Mitchell, was born in Canada and moved to Oak Ridge to work as a statistician at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in the late 60s. In 1993, he died of leukemia.

She attended St. Mary's Catholic School in Oak Ridge from pre-Kindergarten to eighth grade, then went to Oak Ridge High School. She is now a 21 year old university student exploring life and learning by leaps and bounds.

Emily has now returned from her visit to Hiroshima. She has documented her trip in a most interesting and insightful manner. She has also agreed to share that experience with you readers. I am most pleased to be able to present her journal for you to enjoy.

I warn you, the next few weeks of reading *Historically Speaking* will be an in-depth journey of discovery. You will experience many emotions along side Emily. She is a gifted writer and will take you along with her through her emotional yet often humorous episodes of discovery in three of Japan's most famous cities.

She captures the essence of each city and succinctly describes what makes the strongest impressions on her young mind. Set aside your preconceived notions of Japan and enjoy the trip with Emily as your personal guide to Hiroshima, Kyoto and Kokura! You may even learn something of why you, if you are an Oak Ridger, have the emotions you do when someone talks about Hiroshima.

December 28, 2007

11:16 A.M. Eastern Time

There's no turning back now. My alarm woke me up at 3:30 this morning. It was quite an unpleasant sound, not just because of the obscenely early hour, but also because I was exhausted from the day before. I spent hours packing and repacking and fending off my mother from sneaking a pair of long johns into my suitcase "just in case."

I kept worrying that I wouldn't have enough stuff. Then I would worry that I might have too much. I've been traveling plenty of times before, but never before have I been alone, and in a country

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where I only know how to say "Good Afternoon," "Thank you," and "Sushi." I figure if I never meet anyone in the morning or evening, I should be alright.

This all started two years ago. I took a class on Religion and Existentialism at my University, where we read John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. Not that I hadn't *heard* about the destruction of the first atomic bomb, but I had never *thought* about it before. And here it was in story form, which takes you to the people and the up-close realities that get hazy in the distant perspective of history books.

I reacted to this new knowledge more heavily than the rest of my class. I couldn't get it out of my head that it was *my city* that had helped build it. It was *my home* that had destroyed Hiroshima. It was *my parents* that later met in Oak Ridge, and it was *me* that was born from this fateful meeting.

So I wrote a letter to Hiroshima - an apology. I said I was sorry for the bomb. But mostly, I wrote to this personified city, I was sorry that I wasn't sorry that it happened. My existence is an indirect product of the same city that created, and was created for, the bomb. And honestly, I would choose my life over the thousands of strangers that died in a white flash 62 years ago.

I read this letter in front of my class. Well, I didn't read it exactly, but I gave them copies of it, and showed a video about Oak Ridge, as if, in some way, that could absolve me from my inherited guilt. Maybe this pilgrimage to Hiroshima is just an extension of that effort.

That's how it all began. I chose to do my Senior Thesis on the Manhattan Project, and now I'm on a 777 flying over the patchwork plains of the Midwest.

Why am I going? On the surface: to do research; by seeing things from the other side. But below that, perhaps, to convince myself that the evils of history were necessary, and to search for the remains of my spiritual brother, the more infamous child of the Manhattan Project, that made this same trip over half a century ago on the *Enola Gay*.

December 28, 2007

36,000 feet above Anchorage, Alaska

From up here, it looks like the sun is always just about to set.

A year and a half ago, I went to Turkey with a class. The flight from New York City to Istanbul was torturous. I swore to myself at the end of it that I would never again subject myself to eight hours of discomfort willingly.

But here I am again. On yet another plane, flying halfway around the world and looking for answers. Last time, it was the Atlantic Ocean we were flying over. This time it's the Pacific. We're not chasing the sun, but running with it, not wanting just yet to let the day go, but neither wanting to blatantly defy the divine rules of day and night.

A different year, a different direction! Pardon my cliché, but I feel most afraid that the answers I'm really trying to find are stuck in another, more internal place. That place, though, is more terrifying than any ten-hour flight. Because, if I seek there and don't find it - if I get no answers but a void - then I'll have no one and nothing to blame but myself.

We have begun. We are on a journey with Emily Mitchell, a uniquely talented writer with an unusual ability to express the essence of her experiences. She is describing her voyage of discovery from Oak

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Ridge to Hiroshima. You will be amazed at the impact touring that city has on her. You will learn how people who visit Hiroshima think about the atomic bomb.

She will share with us in coming weeks, at a gut level, just what it means for a young lady from Oak Ridge to go seeking the truth that is embedded in that world-changing event of the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima. She will show you what being one of the people in Oak Ridge whose parents ushered in the Atomic Age and who produced the uranium used in Little Boy truly means. Her insight is tremendous.



Emily Mitchell visits the Y-12 History Exhibit Hall in preparation for her trip to Hiroshima