

At 17, Flornes (Flo) Conway-Derley arrived in Tokyo, armed with an English/Japanese dictionary, minimal Japanese language skill and no idea who was meeting her or how she'd get to her final destination; Utsunomiya, 3hrs drive north of Tokyo.

“I was literally on the plane”, says Conway-Derley, “and the organisers were still trying to find me a host family!” Today she recalls her exchange year fondly and believes it was a turning point for her.

Conway-Derley grew up in Bundaberg QLD but laughs and declares that doesn't mean she's a rum drinker. “I was a bit of a tomboy when I was growing up,” she says, “but I always had a fascination for the stars and wanted to be an astronomer.”

Her school years however, were frustrating as she was steered toward subjects such as biology, creating a path she felt, leading away from her dream.

Wishing to break that pattern and experience something different, she seized the opportunity to participate in an exchange program enabling language students to experience culture as well as perfect their chosen language.

“When I first arrived in Tokyo I was overwhelmed,” says Conway-Derley, “but being in Japan gave me clarity.” It was there that she became interested in physics and discovered she wanted to be a scientist.

Although she initially felt isolated, Conway-Derley now believes she gained the necessary “time out” to think, because of the language barrier and cultural differences.

She remembers the cultural differences between herself and her hosts as more entertaining than troublesome and says, “I was blonde at the time so I felt like a show piece whenever we went anywhere.”

Trips to the supermarket became a favourite. “Because”, she says, “you learn a lot about the culture in supermarkets.”

Conway-Derley still visits supermarkets to check out what the locals are buying whenever she travels to a new place.

During her exchange year, Conway-Derley lived with three host families and remains in contact, particularly with the final family. She says the main things she gained from her experience were huge improvements to her Japanese and the determination to follow her dream.

She did and now at 27, Conway-Derley is a research scientist working with a consulting company focussed on the mining industry.

Having left Bundaberg and rum behind, she currently lives in the well known Sydney beachside suburb, Bondi where she still finds time to stop and check out the stars.