

2017 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Luke Daniel

As a 2017 student ambassador of Kurashiki, it is hard to explain in words how thankful I am to the Heart of America Japan-America Society for giving me this amazing and exhilarating opportunity. Even though I went to Kurashiki last year with my school, this trip gave me the additional experience of traveling alone and independently along with allowing me to understand the Japanese language and culture in greater depth. In particular, I would like to thank Fran Lemery, Patty Woods, Jan Conard, Hideko Schackmann, and the rest of the HAJAS members for preparing us well, giving great advice for the trip. I would also like to thank James Benson and Koji Shirakawa for taking us all around Japan and especially for taking me to the doctor for my infected piercing. That meant so much to me and they truly made me feel comfortable.

When we arrived at the Kansai airport, we were exhausted and tired, yet so excited. After we left customs, we were greeted by Koji Shirakawa, a friendly face in the crowded airport. He took us to the train station where we waited for the train in the hot and humid Osaka weather. We then got onto the train and headed for a different station where we would take a shinkansen to Okayama. It was amazing watching the buildings fly by the window of the shinkansen. We then arrived at the Okayama station where we took one last train headed for Kurashiki. During the last train ride, I was nervous to meet my host family, but also very excited. When we arrived at the station, we were greeted by all of our host families. I was greeted by my host Dad, Takeshi Nishiguchi, and my host Mom, Tomoka Nishiguchi. I knew, right when I met my host family, that I was going to enjoy my time with them. Both my host dad and mom were fluent in English but I did not let that stop me from speaking Japanese with them.

We then headed home and arrived at a huge beautiful house perched on a steep hill. It had a great view of all of Kurashiki. They had 2 Shiba Inus. Their names were Kotetsu and Nanako. My host Mom showed me to my room which was a traditional Japanese style room. It had the tatami floor mats and sliding doors. I was so surprised when I saw it. I then met my host brother Ryo. He loved playing video games and we both played the new Splatoon 2 game together. I wasn't nearly as good as he was.

The next morning I went to the school and made a lot of friends there. We went to the many different classes like English and Music. It was a memorable day and I was sad to leave the school. My host mom then picked me up and we headed off to 7-Eleven which was completely different from 7-Elevens in America. They actually had good food there. My host mom introduced me to the convenience-store soba. When I tasted it, I was surprised of how good it was. From then on, when we would go to 7-Eleven, I would always choose the soba. In the morning my family always made the best breakfast. They served me a plate of fruit consisting of sliced white peaches, apples, and my favorite of all, Kyoho grapes. They were the best grapes I have ever tasted. I keep hoping I'll find them here in Kansas City!

Halfway through the stay of my first host family, Nanako passed away. She was only 2 years old. My host family decided to dig a grave for Nanako in their backyard. Ryo and I grabbed 2 shovels and started digging the hole. It was a really sad because even though I only knew Nanako for 4 days, it felt like I knew her forever. I also appreciated that they let me take part in her burial. They really included me as a family member.

My host mom made some of the best food I have ever tasted. She made okonomiyaki, sushi, miso soup, ramen, and curry and rice. My favorite out of all were the curry rice and ramen. On my last night with my first host family, we went to a yakiniku restaurant. I hope to go back there again on a future visit to Japan – amazing food.

The next day I started packing all of my things and getting my suitcase ready to ship to the airport. I put on my dress clothes and got in the car. When we arrived my host Dad dropped me off and I headed to the room where we all would meet. I met the Japanese students that were heading off to Kansas City. They did a performance for us and we did our dance for them. Afterwards we got time to talk to them and got some time to get acquainted. We then walked to the Kurashiki City Hall where we listened to the Mayor speak. We then introduced ourselves in Japanese. We even met a group that was going to New Zealand.

When it was finished, we walked out where our new host families were waiting for us. My host mom Saeko, my host brother Koma (12 years old), and my host sister Yuki (8 years old) were waiting for me. We walked out of the City Hall and got in the car with my new host family. A sad feeling came over me when I left my first host family. I didn't realize how much I would miss them until I had already left them, but I also knew that I was going to really learn to love this host family. On the way home, my host mom told me a funny story. She said that when she and Yuki were at Starbucks at Aeon, Yuki thought she saw me there and asked her mom, but my host mom didn't think it was me. It turned out they actually saw me earlier in the week! That really surprised me hearing that story. It really shows just how small the world is.

When we arrived home I met my host father Katsuya. We talked and got to know each other. Koma, Yuki, and I started playing Mario. After we played for awhile, we decided to go out to eat. There was a ramen shop close by so we decided to go by foot. When we arrived we ate some delicious ramen with pork, bean sprouts, and a hard boiled egg. After that we walked back home, I took a shower and went to bed.

My host sister Yuki always played the piano which was so relaxing to listen to. She would play "It's A Small World After All" and many songs from the Studio Ghibli films like "Itsumo Nando Demo" from *Spirited Away* and "Cat Bus" from *My Neighbor Totoro*. Every time I listen to those songs now, they remind me of her and the family.

One day I even went to Kumon with Koma and Yuki where they studied English. I had the opportunity to learn Japanese in the class. This was a great experience for me to learn the Japanese teaching style. I also went to Koma and Yuki's calligraphy class. They taught me how to correctly use the brush and paint the kanji smoothly. It took many tries for me to get used to it. Once I became good enough, we took the best calligraphy I did and glued it to a fan. They even showed me how I write my name in calligraphy form.

My second host family took me to many places throughout Kurashiki and Okayama. They took me to the Okayama castle, the Kurashiki Bridge, and took me out shopping many times. They also took me to the Tenryo festival, a summer festival in Kurashiki. They gave me a *jinbei* to wear which is a traditional Japanese style of clothing worn to summer festivals. We walked around a bit and watched part of the parade. We started getting hungry and started looking for a place to eat. We ate at a

delicious *yakitori* restaurant. We didn't eat at home as much as my first family, but the one time we did, Saeko made the most delicious *unadon*.

On the last day with my last host family, we drove to the mall where all our host families met up, along with all four of us exchange students. We had a whole room rented out where our first and second host families met together. It made me so happy to see my old host family. I also got to know all the other host families too. I was so nervous for the dance performance we had to do, but when we started dancing, I became so much more comfortable. Everyone was laughing and we were all having a great time even though we knew these were our last hours. We made the best of the time we had left.

After all the fun, it was time to leave and head off to the train station. We hugged our families and waved them goodbye. I still remember their faces when I left. It hurt so much to leave. I just remember the huge empty feeling that filled up inside of me when I left. We got on the Shinkansen and headed to Kyoto. When we arrived, we switched to a train which got us closer to the hotel. Finally, when we arrived at the hotel, I was so surprised to see how small it was. Everything was confined into such a small space. I wasn't complaining though; I actually thought it was nice.

The next morning, we got up, ate breakfast and headed out the door where our driver was waiting for us. He took us to many different temples and shrines throughout Kyoto including the Kinkakuji Temple and the Yasaka Shrine. He even brought us to a little maid cafe where I drank some ginger ale and had a bowl of ice cream. We also had lunch at a restaurant right next to the cafe where we ate some tempura soba. After

that we headed back to the hotel and had a good night sleep for the next day was the sad, long plane ride back to America.