

2017 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Michaela Harding

Without a doubt, the Student Ambassador trip to Japan was one of the most exhilarating and life-changing experiences I've ever had. Countless people behind the scenes and present in our trip aided us in our travel to Japan, and I am very grateful to them for it. The HAJAS members who helped fund our trip, the leaders such as Patty Woods, Jan Conard, and Hideko Schackmann, who orchestrated and guided us through the process, the staff in Kurashiki, like Koji Shirakawa and James Benson, who invariably helped us in Japan, and my host families who graciously opened up their homes for me to live in are all people who deserve all the thanks and appreciation in the world.

Three of the Student Ambassadors – myself, Irene, and Kaitlin – had never traveled out of the country before, and we were equally excited and nervous to do so. However, the flights and customs happened completely smoothly; there was nothing for us to worry about at all! As soon as we arrived in Kansai Airport and finished customs, we met Koji-san, who was waiting for us with a brilliantly colorful sign. He then guided us onto a myriad of trains, which I had absolutely no experience with, and we traveled for about two hours. Then, at our final destination in Kurashiki, we finally met our host families! My first host family was the Fujikawa family, which consisted of my host father Kazu, my host mother Mami, and my host sister Minori for the majority of my stay. Minori's two sisters, Kaho and Miyu, worked and went to a university, respectively, so they did not stay with us in the house. They took me home and I unpacked some of my belongings, while Mami made us my first dinner in Japan. While staying with the

Fujikawa family, I slept in another bed in Minori's room, and every night before bed, we would sit on her couch, watch TV, and eat snacks.

The first full day we were in Japan, Luke, Irene, and I went to Kurashiki Commercial High School. We mostly attended class with Irene's host sister, Yukino, where we made many new friends and they practiced English with us. When English class rolled around, the teacher asked us to read aloud and make clarifications about English phrases and words in the text in order to teach the other students. Then, the whole school went to the gymnasium, where we watched a presentation. Afterward, we said our good-byes and returned home. During our stay with our first host families, the student ambassadors also traveled with the Kurashiki delegation that had just returned from Kansas City, attending a tour experience at a temple, making udon noodles, and going on a yacht cruise. We actually were filmed and ended up being on Kurashiki's news that evening! Another day, we went with Kurashiki Commercial High School's English club to the historical area of Kurashiki.

As Kaitlin's host family and my host family were very good friends, I hung out with Kaitlin a lot. One day, we went to the AEON Mall together, and we also went with my host dad's coworkers to the German Forest, which is a park with several different attractions. We did Nagashi Soumen together at a barbecue party. Nagashi Soumen, as they call it, is taking a slide made out of a bamboo chute and running water down it with a hose. While the water is running, someone puts down soumen noodles onto the top and it slides down into a colander at the end, but the game is to try and catch it with chopsticks. It was super entertaining and hilarious!

Unfortunately, my time with my first host family had to come to an end. My last night before leaving, the Fujikawa family surprised me with a birthday cake and presents, since my birthday was July 25, when I would be with my second host family. I was so grateful and touched by their overwhelming generosity. The next day, we met the mayor, halfway through our student ambassador trip, and student delegations from Kurashiki going to New Zealand and Kansas. There, we switched off host families, and I met my second one, the Toshiro family. They were a family of four, with both of my host parents, and a host brother and sister. My sister, Miyu, had been studying English for 13 years, but she hadn't gotten much practice with a native speaker before, so she still learned a lot from me. She was able to help me translate what I wanted to say, and taught me many Japanese vocabulary words, too. My brother, Ryota, also had been studying English, but not for nearly as long as she had. I spent a lot of time with my host mother, Yoko, since she had taken off work for the time I was there, while Takeshi, my host father who worked at Honda, still worked quite a bit.

We went to the Tenryo Festival in Kurashiki, where Miyu and I dressed up in yukata and saw so many of Miyu's friends and my previous host family. I also encountered many of the people I had met from the day we went to school. We ate a lot of street market food and watched many of the festivities. A few days later, Yoko, Miyu, Miyu's grandmother, and Miyu's aunt and cousins took me to the onsen. I was extremely nervous since it was so intimidating, but Miyu showed me the etiquette and rules of the onsen. It was truly a wonderful and bonding experience. Then, the day after, it was my birthday, so I invited Irene and her host sister, and Miyu invited some of her friends, too. Ryota's birthday was August 11, so we decided to have a joint birthday

party together. We had a nice celebration at the Toshiros' home, where Takeshi cooked us barbecue and we ate cake and gave each other presents. Once again, I was amazed by the support and altruism of my host families and friends, providing me with such an incredible experience.

During this span of time with our second host families, the student ambassadors also traveled to Miyajima and Hiroshima with James Benson and Koji-san. We went to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, which was a very sorrowful and somber experience, but nevertheless valuable and educational. A few days later, after spending more time with our families, we had to say good-bye. At the Farewell Party, we ate dinner with all of the host families from our trip. The student ambassadors then danced to "Uptown Funk," and then I danced a recently sensational dance in Japan known as the "Koi Dance" with my first host sister, Minori. Afterward, Irene sang "Halo" by Beyoncé with her host sister, Ryo. Then, we all said a few parting words to the entire group, and tearfully told everyone good-bye. The last thing I wanted to do was leave them, and leave Japan in general. Luckily, we weren't leaving Japan *quite* yet, as James Benson took us to Kyoto, where we toured for a day, and then left the day after.

I fell in love with Japan while I was there and became more passionate about learning Japanese to attain fluency. My host families both provided me with excellent and enjoyable experiences and opportunities, and I loved them both as my own families, as well. Once again, I must thank everyone who helped make this trip happen, from those in Kansas City to those in Japan. It was unforgettable and life-changing, and I am looking forward to returning to Japan someday.