2016 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Lillian Oliver

From going to city hall to making udon, the trip to Japan has been a life changing experience. This once in a lifetime trip to Kurashiki was made possible because of all the wonderful support from the Heart of America Japan-America Society and from our organizers in Japan; along with of course my helpful and loving host families, leaving me to be forever grateful to everyone involved. All the hard hours of planning from Patty Woods, Jan Conrad, Hiroko Keightley, Diane Daugherty and many others in the United States along with our Japanese counterparts James Benson and Tomoaki Fujii, to name a few, working equally hard to give us the best possible ambassadorship exchange. All of their dedication allowed the ambassadors from Kansas City to fully appreciate Kurashiki to its highest potential and to prepare us for the journey. To everyone who helped make this trip possible, you have my endless gratitude and life long thanks for allowing me to be involved in such an amazing exchange.

I have been fortunate enough to live in Okinawa, Japan for nearly four years, but my experience was limited due to living near a military base on a small island. This ambassadorship not only allowed me to represent America in a positive way but also allowed me a chance to see and experience everyday life in Japan. While I have been to certain festivals, I had never been to Japanese schools and lived in a Japanese styled house or experience an onsen. I have also flown alone from Japan to the U.S. before, and I am happy to say with a few minor moments of finding tickets, this time as well we had a safe flight to Japan and back. When we first arrived in Japan, Mr. Benson came to meet us and we headed off to Kyoto and our hotel. In Kyoto we stopped at the *Kinkakuji* temple and enjoyed the beautiful and rich scenery the golden encased temple had to offer. We ate delicious dango samples and stopped by the impressive 600-year-old tree that stands strong and tall next to the garden and traditional architecture. After viewing the ancient temple we headed over to the waterfall to wash and cleanse our hands. Japan has thousands of temples. There are more temples than convenience stores. Along with the temples, there are exquisite gardens to accent the country's natural beauty and architecture.

After a long trip and temple seeing we rested in the hotel. The next day we headed out to meet our long awaited families in Kurashiki. After an exciting first meeting with our new host families the ambassador students from Kansas City, we said our goodbyes to each other and headed off with our families. Personally, the first meeting with both of my host families is what I loved the most. As soon as I met my first host family, everything became suddenly clear and real; I was in Japan and I was to stay a month with these wonderful people. My first host dad was a carpenter and I had the opportunity of staying in a simple, yet refined house he had built that was perfect in every way. I was also lucky to have Minori as a host sister for the entire week and for her older college sisters, Miyu and Kaho, to come and visit me. Mami-san, my host mother, took me shopping and prepared fruit for me everyday, even making me *usagi ringo*, bunny shaped apple slices. I had so much fun that week playing games and going out to eat. I was also fortunate enough to see Kestrel, one of the other four ambassadors, many times due to our host families being close.

During our stay we had several planned events and activities, one being the visit to Hiroshima and Miyajima where we were able to view the memorial sites and museum. The trip was an eye-opener for all of the ambassadors and truly helped us understand the tragedy that happened there as well as Japan's perseverance through such difficult times. Being in Hiroshima is a completely different experience than learning about the events from textbooks and I am grateful I had the opportunity to go. After an emotional trip, we ate the Hiroshima *okonomiyaki* for lunch and headed back to Kurashiki. Other trips included udon making, going to the *bikan chiku* area and meditation at a temple. The temple and the trip to the historical part of Kurashiki ended with us gaining more knowledge about Japanese culture as well as some surprise TV interviews at the end.

After an eventful week or so of shopping and going to many Japanese events with my first host family, it was time to say goodbye and meet my next family. I am happy to say our first meeting together went perfectly even though I was again nervous about the meeting. I had nothing to worry about though, my first host mom going so far as to help by telling my new host family some information about me and my interests. I was overjoyed to find out that my second host family was in a more rural area and I had the opportunity to go hiking and to partake in festivals.

Once again I had the fortune of having host siblings near my age, 17 year old Sae and 12 year old Shunki. The eldest sister was in college and unable to see me due to college testing, but I was able to talk briefly to her on the phone. I had so much fun. We played Uno and other games together and I even helped out with some of their English homework. My second host mom was a P.E. teacher and when we went to a nearby school, we watched the volleyball match. As it turned out, one of the girl volleyball teams was actually from my host mom's school and she coached them. I was also able to go to an onsen. I was excited to learn my second host family spoke very limited english, if any, allowing me a chance to challenge myself to express thoughts in both in Japanese and to understand the conversations.

During the trip I acquired new vocabulary, some of which happened throughout interesting and funny adventures. When hiking up mountains to temples with my second host family, there were so many spiderwebs we had to get a branch to knock them down every few feet. The path up the mountains had not been used in a while and the path served as a hub for spider gatherings. After those adventures in the mountains I quickly learned the word for spider web, *kumonosu*. That was just one of the hilarious adventures my host families during which I learned new vocabulary.

At last it was time to part and go back to our lives in America. My wonderful host families accommodated my desires to experience life in Japan far beyond my expectations and hopes. I stayed with two caring host families that I was able to bond with over the time period of a month and have that bond for a lifetime. After a tearful and sad farewell, we headed back to Kyoto. As a last adventure, we had Fujii take us to a maid cafe. Overall my trip has been fantastic and eventful, further inspiring me to return back at any chance possible. I want to again give a huge thanks to everyone that made this trip a reality. We appreciate your efforts and the hard work you put in to give us this adventure. I cannot express my gratitude enough, thank you.