

2016 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Kestrel Jurkiewicz-Miles

As a 2016 student ambassador and a first-time international traveler, I would like to begin by thanking the Heart of America Japan-America Society for preparing the student ambassadors so well for this experience. Special thanks go to Patty Woods, Jan Conard, Hiroko Keightley, and Dianne Daugherty for supplying us with a plethora of useful information that proved endlessly helpful in our travels. Another huge thanks is in order for the amazing international affairs department in Kurashiki City, especially to James Benson and Tomoaki Fujii. My time in Japan was an eye-opening and life changing experience, from sightseeing in Kyoto to my welcoming and innately accommodating host families to the peace park of Hiroshima. Of course, I couldn't have ever predicted any of that, and I barely slept on the flight from San Francisco to Osaka out of excitement (and a touch of apprehension).

When we arrived in the Kansai Osaka airport we were quickly greeted by James Benson—likely the friendliest face anyone ever saw. James is probably the most amiable person I have ever met in my life. He led us through exchanging our dollars into yen and took us to the train station connected to the airport, which spans the distance between the manmade island and the mainland. The train took us to Kyoto, where we stayed in a hotel overnight and went shopping in the morning, allowing me to experience Japanese department stores. That afternoon we went around Kyoto's many temples with a driver. We visited three temples in Kyoto, which was entirely new for me—I had never even considered just how many temples there are in Japan and how beautiful they all are. After our time in Kyoto, we took the *Shinkansen* (bullet train) to Kurashiki.

My first impression in Kurashiki was that it was full of friendly people. We were greeted by our first host families at the train station; I met the Sato family there, Mariko, my host mother, Teru, my host brother, and Hana, my seven-year-old host sister. Later, I would meet Yuusei, my oldest host brother, and Ken-chan (as everyone called him), my host father. Mariko was always extremely kind to me despite a very dense language barrier, and was always patient with my Japanese and helped me to understand many, many things about her family and Japanese culture. Her husband, Ken, short for Kenji, was a jokester at heart and was always laughing. He is a security system programmer and Mariko is a beautician. Since both of them worked during the day, I spent a few days spending time with Lillian's (a fellow student ambassador's) host family, which alternated with her spending a few days with my host family. The family's golden retriever, Shisu, was always an extremely bright and sunny pet to come home to. Because my host siblings were on summer vacation for most of the homestay, I was able to spend a lot of time with them, especially my little host sister Hana. I would like to extend my thanks to the whole Sato family, who welcomed me so wholeheartedly into their household.

With the Sato family I got a chance to see a lot of Kurashiki's society and attractions. The very first day I went to AEON Mall, a giant shopping center in central Kurashiki. A few days later the Sato family and Lillian's family, the Fujikawa family, had a barbecue in Mami Fujikawa's beautiful office in Kojima, a nearby district. I was invited to the Satos' family restaurant, where we ate delicious sashimi and tempura prepared by my host great aunt. That evening I was able to meet much of my extended host family, including my host grandfather. The last day, Mariko, Hana, Lillian, Mami, and I

went to Kurashiki's small but very interesting aquarium, where I saw sand snakes for the first time. Outside the aquarium I played a fishing game and caught a hermit crab, which I named Claus and gave to Hana. When the time came to switch to the Kobayashi family's house, I was a little apprehensive and very sad to be leaving the Sato family behind.

After the switch between host families, I got to know the Kobayashi family. Their home was impressive- sliding glass doors all over the outside first floor, solar panels on the roof, and a field of solar panels directly to the left of the house. Hideo, my second host father, felt very strongly about renewable energy, so his family owned not one but two nearby solar panel fields and drove mainly an all-electric car. Yukari, my host mother, loved Disney especially the classics like Mickey Mouse and Whinnie the Pooh. Their oldest son, Ayumu, had a passion for videogames and making origami—specifically a model that his father called the “fukuyama rose,” which he taught me how to make despite its being a very difficult fold. The youngest, my host sister Koko-chan, hated vegetables and loved the freedom that summer vacation afforded her. Hideo was an amazing host, always taking me around to see things and asking me what I wanted to do and what I found interesting. Again, I send a big thank-you to the Kobayashi family for letting me into their home and giving me a great experience in Japan.

During the second homestay, I got many more chances to see amazing things. One of the most interesting to me was Okayama castle, a fortified castle that was rebuilt to traditional style in the 60s. The grounds also included the original moon-viewing tower and the original walls surrounding the outside, in which some of the stones had turned red from fire. My host parents and I had a great time at the Kojima sailor uniform

museum, at which I tried on every single uniform they had. We went to the Kojima Jeans Street and did indigo dyeing on bandanas and walked around a few shrines in the Jeans Street area. My host grandparents, who lived just across the street from us, taught me how to make mochi, which we ate toasted at breakfast. At the end of the two homestays, we had a nice dinner with both of our families and had to say goodbye at Kurashiki station.

Outside of our homestays, we went on scheduled trips around the area. The first trip was to Hiroshima and Miyajima. In Hiroshima we visited Peace Park, a monument to remembering the dropping of the atomic bomb, saw the beautifully preserved A-bomb dome, and visited the museum inside the park, at which we saw all sorts of simultaneously fascinating and horrifying artifacts and remnants showing the effects of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, as well as four paper cranes folded by President Obama on his historic visit to the memorial. Afterwards, we ate Hiroshimayaki (or Hiroshima-style okonomiyaki) at a restaurant Miyuki-san, our leader, said was very popular. The rest of the day we spent touring the temples of Miyajima, an island off Hiroshima, and eating Momijimanju, the dessert that Miyajima is famous for. Our visit to Hiroshima is something I will never forget.

This trip was life changing, truly. I never could have imagined all the things I experienced in our sister city and around Japan. I have gotten out of this trip a much larger image of the world and of cultures that without HAJAS I wouldn't have experienced. The experience, from day one to week three, was amazing. Thank you to everyone who made this possible, here in the U.S. and in Kurashiki. If I could relive this trip, I would do it in a heartbeat.