

## **2016 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Stephanie Krutz**

Ever since I was younger, I have always loved Japan. Something about it intrigued me, and in seventh grade when I discovered anime, I began paying attention to the Japanese I heard. Cut to 2014 when I went to Japan for a school trip. It was an amazing experience, but I felt like I had not done all I wanted to. As the brief trip was mostly sightseeing, I was grateful for the chance to explore this new world, but also felt like I had not experienced the life of a Japanese person. I wanted to return to Japan as soon as I could, and I was given that opportunity with the Japan-America Society this year, in 2016. Consequently, I truly appreciate all the time and effort put into the organization of the trip, so thank you to all the members of the Japan-America Society, both in Kansas City and in Kurashiki. This has been an incredibly life-changing event and I have you all to thank for it.

To begin my summary of the Japan-America Society's 2016 Student Ambassadors' trip to Japan, I must first begin with our airport experience. Despite only having spoken a few times, by the time we four student ambassadors met at the airport, got our boarding passes, and boarded the plane, I felt like I already knew them well. We talked and laughed and became friends within the first hour of being together. I knew this would be a good group. Surprisingly, the 10.5-hour flight to Japan went smoothly and the time was occupied by us talking, sleeping, and watching Disney movies in Japanese. Even my guitar did not cause any problems, for which I was thankful.

In Osaka, we met with James Benson, our friendly interpreter and tour guide. We then took an express train to Kyoto where we ran into Dianne Daugherty with her class! We also met with one of James' Japanese friends, Rena, with whom we went to eat

okonomiyaki for dinner. As it was the first day in Japan, I had quite a bit of trouble switching my mental translator from English to Japanese, and thus could not communicate as well as I would have liked. Despite that, Rena was a joy to talk with, and the okonomiyaki was delicious. After dinner, we returned to the hotel and the five of us (James, Kestrel, Lillian, Alice, and I) all said our farewells and went to our own rooms for the night. The next day, we ate breakfast, did some shopping, and then went sightseeing. We visited Kinkaku-ji (The Golden Pavilion), Kiyomizu Temple, and Sanjūsangen-dō (a temple containing 1,001 statues). This was an incredible tour of a small portion of Japan's rich history and culture. Later, in Kurashiki, we met our host families, who welcomed us with open arms.

My first host family, the Sunami family, has two small children of two and eight years, as well as a loving mother and father. As we drove to their home, the kids and I sang along to the Japanese versions of songs from the popular Disney movie, *Frozen*. This was to be the soundtrack that was to accompany most of our subsequent car rides, so I grew to enjoy the songs very much. Among the many heartwarming moments I experienced with the Sunami family, I made several funny memories. One evening, I helped set the table for dinner. Noticing the spoons were all bent, I asked if I should bend them back. Laughing, Yoichi, my host father, replied that the metal spoons were cheap and let me in on a family activity: spoon bending! I was given a new, unbent spoon and was told to hold it in one hand with my thumb on the handle, then to put two fingers on the top and see if I could bend it over my thumb towards myself with one pull (which I could, for the record). It was hilarious seeing my host father teaching Kei-kun, my eight-year-old host brother, how to correctly bend a spoon, accompanied by goofy

spoon-bending battle cries. Also, one day when Satomi, my host mother, and I went shopping on our own, we found out we liked the same manga. I was thrilled to be able to talk with her in such a familiar way. It was then that she became not just my host mother, but a friend as well.

After breakfast, my host grandfather drove me to meet up with the other student ambassadors to go to Hiroshima and Miyajima. I had been to both locations before, but they somehow seemed more special, as I could fully appreciate them for what they are: pieces of Japan's history and symbols of peace. It was an eerie moment, witnessing the silent A-bomb dome in stark contrast to the bustling city behind it. Going to Miyajima was a much happier experience, what with seeing deer roam the island freely. In the parking lot before going to these special locations, I was the last to arrive, which earned me the lasting nickname of "Stephanie *wa doko desu?*" or "where is Stephanie?" from the other student ambassadors. This nickname followed me throughout the trip, which I still find hilarious. The next couple of days were a whirlwind of activities including seeing Okayama Castle and Korakuen – the enormous park next to the castle where we saw wedding photographers snapping photos of two happy couples in traditional Japanese wedding clothing, a water festival celebrating firemen with a water-gun battle, and a summer festival to which I wore a beautiful burnt-sienna-and-black striped yukata.

On the day the student ambassadors were supposed to meet the mayor, I realized too late that I had mixed up two different days and that I was wearing a slightly casual outfit! The whole situation worked itself out somehow, and everyone was very kind and respectful. On the last day with my first host family, I was brought to a Buddhist temple on a mountain and got to witness a prayer service. During the ceremony, I was

honored to receive a prayer for my safe return. I can still hear the low humming and heartbeat-like *boom boom* of the drums resonating through my bones. The days flew by, and with every minute spent with the Sunami family, I grew to love them more and more. I truly felt like a big sister to Kei-kun and Aki-chan, as well as a daughter and friend for Yoichi-san and Satomi-san.

When we switched host families, the first thing I found out about Saori Kawada, my second host mother, was that her English is incredibly good. We frequently switched between English and Japanese, which was good practice for both of us. I met Masaki, my host father, Fuka, a girl my age with whom I became close friends, and Otomu, my younger host brother. Some of my favorite memories with them are all the evenings of delicious dinners, beautiful cakes (made by Saori-san), and *kakigori* almost every night; the cold shaved ice juxtaposed their warm kindness, making it the best *kakigori* I've ever had. On days that we went out to the city, fond memories include seeing Mickey and Minnie Mouse at a parade at a huge summer festival, Otomu and I going to a *neko* café to play with cats, going hiking with Masaki-san and Otomu-kun, and spending time with Fuka's friends, who I saw twice; once when we all went out to sing karaoke and go shopping at a mall, then another time at Fuka's academy. They accepted me into their group despite only having known me a brief amount of time, and for that I'm incredibly grateful. I had so much fun and still keep in touch with them. I truly bonded with the Kawada family and it would take pages and pages more for me to accurately represent the joy I felt with being accepted into such a loving and caring home.

I had such different experiences in both homestays, but the elements that both had in common were incredible hospitality, love, and kindness. I will never forget this

trip to Kurashiki, Japan, and I hope to provide the same amount of love and warmth to my Japanese families if they ever come to Kansas City. Again, an enormous thank you and *domo arigatou gozaimasu* to everyone who contributed to getting the four of us to Japan. On behalf of the four 2016 Japan-America Society student ambassadors, this was a life-changing experience and one we all will hold in our hearts forever.