

2017 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Irene Gatimi

Before I say anything else, I would like to begin by saying thank you. Thank you to the Heart of America Japan-America Society and its partners, who have truly brought wonders into my life. Having the opportunity to be a student ambassador was phenomenal and a lifelong dream come true for me. Patty Woods, thank you for preparing us for this trip. Jan Conrad, thank you for helping us prepare for the presentation. Hideko Schackmann, thank you for helping me organize my speech for the mayor. Overall, you three helped us prepare for this trip. I'd like to thank Koji Shirakawa and James Benson for being our guides and our mentors while in Japan. We, as student ambassadors, learned new things pertaining to Japanese culture and everyday life from the both of you. A special thank-you to the Okamura and Nomura families for welcoming me into your homes. You made me feel as if I were part of each of your family. Thank you very much to the Honorable Mayor Kaori Ito for welcoming us to Kurashiki at City Hall. This trip has brought forth a greater understanding and appreciation for Japan.

I remember the days leading up to the trip to Japan. I was both nervous and excited. I was nervous because this was my first time traveling abroad, and excited because I was finally being given the opportunity to travel to Japan. Michaela, Luke, Kaitlin and I, were at the KC Airport extremely early and were seen off by Patty Woods, Hideko Schackmann and our respective families. When we finally waved goodbye and boarded the plane, I knew that our journey had begun. I didn't sleep the whole flight.

Getting off the plane in Osaka was very interesting. I was looking around everywhere and at everything, making sure to take a mental picture of it all. The Kansai

Osaka airport was beautiful. After getting our bags and going through customs we met with Koji-san. Koji-san smiled at us brightly and welcomed us to Japan. My heart surged with joy and I smiled back at him. All of us were smiling, for we were finally in Japan. Koji-san helped us convert our currency, as well as ship some of our bags to our first host families. After this, we began our journey through trains and a shinkansen (a bullet train) all the way to Kurashiki. Koji-san helped us every step of the way and we were truly grateful, for we would have otherwise gotten lost. While transferring from train to train, Koji-san explained how the train system works, how to figure out which platform belongs to which train and answered every question we asked. Koji-san not only guided us, but also made sure we understood what was going on. For that, I am very grateful. I began to learn new things right from the onset of this trip.

We were greeted by our first host families who were holding a large welcome banner at Kurashiki station. I saw smile after smile on every person's face. I ran up to my host sister Yukino Nomura and she ran to me as well. We met halfway and gave each other a long embrace. We had met the previous summer when Yukino and seven other student delegates had visited Kansas City. My family hosted two of the students, Miyoko Fujimoto and Sai Funato. After hugging we quickly made our way to her parents, who greeted me with warm smiles. After our initial meeting we went to the car and drove home. Yukino and I talked about many things for we had many memories and experiences to share. Once we arrived at their home, Yukino took me to my room where I unpacked my bags and got ready for dinner. The food on the table looked very delicious! I am very open to trying new things, so I tried everything on the table and I loved it.

The next morning, we had school! Yukino attended the school we were visiting so we rode bikes to school together. In the front of the school we were greeted by the English Club of Kurashiki Commercial High School and the English teacher sponsor of the group. They guided us into the school. We took off our shoes and exchanged them for slippers. As we walked through the halls leading up to the class, students would wave at us and greeted us with a “Good morning.” Everyone was extremely friendly. We went to the same classroom as my host sister Yukino and Miyoko Fujimoto, the student I had hosted in Kansas City. During the school day we introduced ourselves, engaged in multiple English classes, and joined a second-year music class. They sang a very moving song for us. I remember the song talking about graduating from high school, going to their own individual paths of life, and that they may one day meet again, but they will forever keep the memories they made together. As a choir singer, I wished my whole choir was there listening with me. The talent here was evident.

After school Yukino, her friend Rino, and I rode our bikes to a beef bowl shop. There, I made it my goal to order my own meal. Rino and Yukino helped me understand menu items that I was uncertain of. The waiter complimented me on my Japanese; I was grateful. After eating, we paid and rode the bikes back home. Upon arriving home, the Nomura family took me to a bakery and a Japanese supermarket. The supermarket reminded me of American ones. After dinner I played Jenga with the Nomura family. It was my first time doing so.

The Nomura family brought great joy to my life. I had many delicious peach flavored items such as peach flavored water, ice cream, and candy. Kurashiki City had the most delicious peaches I had ever tasted. With the Nomura family, I went to the

Bikan Historical Area, the Ohara Art Museum, a Shabushabu restaurant, weaved baskets, and learned the folktale “Momotaro.” I always felt welcomed, and they taught me many things about Japanese family life and Japanese culture. I met with the student delegates that came to Kansas City the summer prior and we really had a wonderful time together playing sports at a sports and games center and shopping. I am very grateful for the time we had together.

Going to *Entsuji* Temple was enlightening and refreshing. I felt as if I truly found my “zen” during meditation. I could hear the rain drops and the wind whispering during meditation; this caused me to feel at peace and one with the Earth. Going to the *Yuga-jinja* was an enjoyable experience. I also enjoyed learning how to make udon at the shop alongside the delegates. Making Japanese food is an art. It was not easy, but the support I received made me feel like I was able to complete the task. Japanese people are very kind.

Meeting Mayor Kaori Ito was an honor. Giving the speech was nerve-racking, but I was more than happy to deliver it. Mayor Ito is a friendly, kind, and intelligent mayor. I am glad I was able to talk to her and learn from her. Meeting the current student delegates that were on their way to Kansas City was also an honor. I made lasting friendships with all of them. The same day I went to City Hall was the same day I went to my second host family, the Okamura’s.

The Okamura family were very kind and on the first night with them, we made sashimi together! Mrs. Okamura showed me how to prepare the rice and Yu Okamura, my host brother, showed me how to prepare the rest of the dish. I sliced the fish and it required a lot of concentration.

The next day my host sister Ryo and I went to the *Natsumatsuri* (summer festival) together. Ryo's grandmother came over to help us get dressed in yukata before the festival, and I was very thankful. I watched very keenly and learned how to dress in yukata. I hope to use this skill for events that occur in America. Attending the festival in Bikan was a great experience. Everyone was happy and full of excitement. There were many people present. Watching the parade was an especially enjoyable experience. I saw many different groups dance. There were elderly woman wearing yukata and dancing with fans, and there were people dressed up as *uni* (demons) and dancing. It was all very different, yet equally fascinating. I hope to experience a Japanese festival someday again.

During my stay with the Okamura's we shopped at AEON mall, I went to school with Ryo, met with Ryo's friends, and attended Yu's kendo lesson and learned some kendo. We went to a forest and met with several people walking their dogs, too. That same day we also went to the Okayama Castle. Every moment spent with them was joyous. I have made a strong bond with both families, and I wish we continue to create bonds as such between American and Japanese people. I am thankful for the Okamura family and everything they did.

Going to Hiroshima was impactful. The museum as well as the Atomic Bomb Dome at the Peace Park is very telling of the effects of a world at war. Seeing the effects of the bomb emboldened my desire for peace in the world. We should end all wars. I believe that we as a world need to achieve peace and unity. For when we achieve this, we will truly be happy. We will be able to solve many problems that we

face as one. Folding the paper cranes at Hiroshima was something new for me. As we let our cranes float down to the side of the wall, I wished for peace.

Later that day, we sailed to Miyajima, a small island in Hiroshima Bay and visited the beautiful temples there. We also encountered many cute deer. The last part of our trip in Kyoto was bittersweet. Kyoto is a stunning city and I was enchanted by all the Japanese culture the city had to offer. I didn't want to leave Japan.

The opportunity to be a student ambassador for the Heart of America Japan-America Society has been my greatest pleasure. Traveling to Japan has given me a chance to learn even more about the culture I admire. I learned many things involving the Japanese culture and tradition and in return I believed we, as student ambassadors, shared what our lives are like as Americans. It was a truly humbling experience being able to meet the happy and kind people of Japan. I hope we continue to strengthen this lovely relationship between America and Japan. I have fallen in love with Japan and I want to be able to visit again many times. Thank you so much for everything. This was life-changing.