

## **2019 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Gavin D. Knapton**

My visit as an ambassador to the wonderful city of Kurashiki in Okayama prefecture of Japan allowed me to further understand the Japanese culture and way of life as well as fully understand the limits of my knowledge of Japanese. Not only did this trip serve as an educational tour, but it also helped me increase my future ambitions and greatly motivated me. During my trip, not only did I meet many incredible people, but I also got the chance to see the similarities between American and Japanese forms of social structures/classes and the difference in relationships. I would like to take a moment to thank all of those who helped me in my goal of going to Japan and those who not only helped me along the way but also me get an even better picture of life in Japan. Thank you, Patty Woods, Jan Conard, Hideko Shackmann, James Benson, Mayor Kaori Ito, Mayors Sly James and Lucas Quinton, as well as all of those at HAJAS and the Rotary Club. I am very grateful for the opportunity you gave me.

When I first arrived in Osaka, I was ecstatic and curious to see the architecture on our way to Kyoto and compare it to that of Tokyo and Sendai, both of which I had seen the year prior. During the first day we did normal stuff such as checking into our hotel. However, for dinner we had the nostalgic taste of real traditional Japanese ramen which is truly in a class of its own compared to the usual American remake. The next day we explored the magnificent city of Kyoto, with our energetic tour guide, Mr. Uchida. He showed us many sights including the Nintendo HQ, Kyoto Imperial Garden, and the Fushimi Inari Shrine. Later we had curry and began our travel to Okayama City. That's when I met my first host family, the Yamaguchi and Okada families. The

Yamaguchi and Okada's were quite the lively bunch and fun to be around. This family was quite large, and I was very grateful to them for hosting me.

The family consisted of the father Koosei, the mother Iyo, their three daughters, Seno, Sayu, and Nene, the youngest member little Han-kun, and the mother's mother, Norie Okada. Next door lived Iyo-san's little brother and his brother's wife and two children.

Over the course of my time with the Yamaguchi and Okada families (including my extra tour days), I got to do many things, try a lot of different foods and see tons of places such as the Seto Ohashi Bridge, a Zen temple, a real Olive Garden (not the restaurant), Kurashiki Festival, Okayama Aeon Mall, and a Japanese high school. In addition, my host family also took me to the beach. It was my first time going to the beach and it happened on the Japanese holiday of Sea Day! Later, we had a Japanese styled BBQ. I got to try yakitori, Shabu-Shabu, Japanese style curry, tonkatsu, tonkatsu-ramen, miso soup, yakisoba, soba, udon, Japanese McDonalds takiyaki burger, etc. I also got to go to a Japanese elementary school with the help of my first host mother, Iyo, and got to be an ESL assistant for the day. I assisted the ESL teacher Mr. Jacob, a Canadian, who has a Japanese wife and two little girls.

I was later transferred to my second host family, the Hirata's. The Hirata family consisted of the mother, Tomoko, the father, Akiyoshi, and their two sons, Ryouchirou and Kenshirou, who were appropriately nicknamed Ryou-chan and Ken-kun. Every so often, Akiyoshi's brother would stop by and hang out. We also visited Ryou-chan and Ken-kun's cousins, Koharu and Mitsu. When I was with them, I also tried many new foods as well. I also got to experience the Imperial gardens outside of the Okayama Castle, the Okayama Castle, as well as Kurashiki's renowned Bikan Town. During this

time, I went to Hiroshima and visited the bomb site and the legendary Itsukushima Shrine and the Atomic Bomb Dome.

The trip was a very enjoyable experience and helped me open my mind even further. I believe this trip has not only expanded my world and world view, it also allowed me to push myself even harder in my pursuit to master the Japanese language. I cannot help but reiterate the fact that I am so very grateful for all the help and support I received from everyone that allowed me to go to Japan and experience the difference between the northern and southern regions of Japan.