

## **2019 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Julie Turner**

Before recounting the experience of being a student ambassador, I would like to thank Jan Conard, Patty Woods, Fran Lemery, Hideko Schackmann, and everyone involved in the Japan-America Society for providing me with this once-in-a-lifetime experience and opportunity to step outside of my comfort zone. I would also like to thank James Benson, Tomomi Ueno, Ms. Ota, everyone involved in the international affairs office in Kurashiki City, and my host families for making my stay in Japan a wonderful experience I will not be forgetting anytime soon. I would like to thank Ken Drakey, Riki Shu, and Gavin Knapton for being my fellow travelers. Finally, I would like to thank my parents for funding this memorable senior trip.

Before arriving in Japan, I was very nervous. I had been to Japan numerous times before, but I had only ever been to Hiroshima and I had only stayed with family. My anxiety only grew during our half-day tour of the beautiful city of Kyoto. We visited the Kiyomizu temple and took a short walk through Fushimi Inari Taisha. We viewed Kinkakuji and drove for a short while through Gion. My nervous feeling relaxed during the train ride to Okayama City Station, and we were all greeted by our host families and a welcome banner. This is when I met Sachiko and Sotaro Irie, the mother and the youngest child of my first host family. We shared some conversation during the short car ride to the Irie family's house. During that short time my worries completely disappeared, and I learned the Irie household had been just as nervous as I had been. Sachiko-san shared that the family was worried about how to communicate with me due to their limited knowledge of English, but she said she was not as worried after learning I could speak some Japanese. Upon arriving to the house, I met Tsubaki, the middle child, who had just gotten home from middle school and was working on some homework. I also met a few children in the neighborhood and their mothers. I would play with them in the following days at the park right next door to Irie-san's house. Around

seven o'clock that evening, I met Natsumi, the oldest child, who was returning home from high school. After eating dinner with Sachiko, Sotaro, Tsubaki, and Natsumi, I was excited to take a shower. Taking a shower was the thing I was most looking forward to when I was getting ready to leave for Japan and I was overjoyed after taking my shower. I would meet the father of the family, Hideyuki, very briefly on the third morning of my stay.

I did many things with the Irie family, mainly consisting of walks in and around the historical quarter and playing in the park. We shot off fireworks one night as well. My favorite thing I did with the Irie family was going to visit Sachiko-san's parents in Kagawa.

In order to get to Sachiko-san's parents' house we had to cross the Seto Ohashi by train. The scenery was beautiful, but I was unable to take pictures. After arriving at the Kagawa Station, we ate udon for lunch, a dish that Kagawa is famous for, and went to visit the Konpira Shrine. In order to reach the shrine, we had to climb seven hundred eighty-five steps, and that was not even to reach the top of the mountain. The view at the top, despite it being cloudy, was amazing. On a clear day I would imagine you can see for miles. There was a traditional Japanese wedding happening inside the temple that we were able to witness. I did *omikuji* which is a fortune that is written on a piece of paper. I also bought *omamori*, which are good luck charms, for my friends and family. Because the *omamori* made at Konpira Shrine are gold, they are said to attract not only general good luck, but also happiness.

After having to say goodbye to the Irie family, I met my next host family, the Mukai's. Yasuko-san, the mother, and Ayato, the fourteen-year-old boy, came to collect me from city hall, and on the way back to their house we picked up Saaya, the seventeen-year-old girl. During my stay with the Mukai family I did many things that were different from what I did with the Irie family. Saaya and Ayto took me to see *Weathering with You*, a movie that was made by the same studio that produced *Your Name*. I also went to the large Aeon Mall and saw a summer festival.

The most memorable activity I did while staying with the Mukai family was when Yasuko-san took me to the *Kōrakuen*, an edo garden dating back to the 1700s. I took many pictures there and found walking through the large garden during the day, despite the heat, was very enjoyable. We went during the week so there were not many people there and everything was very lush and green. I would like to go back during the spring to see many of the flowers in bloom and in August because they have a light festival in the garden at night.

I hope to return to Japan, specifically Kurashiki, and visit with my host families one more time. In the meantime, I will work hard at my studies in college and use the knowledge that I gained during my trip and continue to be open-minded.

I would like to thank again my host families and their friends for making my stay in Kurashiki comfortable, enjoyable, and unforgettable. I would like to thank the members of the HAJAS and everyone in Japan for making this trip happen for all of us. I do not think there are enough words of gratitude in any language to express how thankful I am for being able to travel to Kurashiki this summer. Thank you.