

## **2019 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Ken Drakey**

Every year during July, Kansas City and Kurashiki exchange students as ambassadors for a number of weeks. This year I was chosen as one of the lucky few that got to go to Kurashiki. I have been given the responsibility to represent the Kansas City area in a Japanese society and share the culture and beliefs of people in the US while learning about the culture and beliefs of Kurashiki through this program. I did a homestay with two very different families. The first family was the Tsuchiya family. They were a couple that lives in the district called Mabi. The husband is 70 and the wife is 71. Mabi is an area in Kurashiki that is further from the main area than others and is more rural, too. It was hit by a major flood last year around the same time as my homestay with the family and destroyed many homes and buildings. They felt that it was important for me to understand the grief and the damage dealt to the area and its inhabitants. The Abe family was the second family, and they lived in an area closer to the city called Nakashodanchi.

Before we met our new host families we went on a little tour of Kyoto. At Kyoto we went to the Fushimi Inari Taisha Shrine. It is known for its thousands of beautiful torii gates. After this we went to an area of Kyoto called the Gion area. This place is famous for a group of women called Geisha who are professional entertainers. They live and train in this area and they are well respected. After this we went to a very important building in Japan called Kinkakuji. Everything but the first floor of this building is covered in a fine layer of gold. This building is where Japan held parties for foreign officials and where these foreign officials slept. After this, we finally went to Kurashiki to meet our new families.

My host family had stated that the Mabi hospital was so deep in the flood that people that were on floors up to the third floor had to go to the roof just to stay safe. Their house was hit hard as well; the whole first floor was submerged in water and almost into the second floor. Many houses and stores had to be taken down or rebuilt because of the damage. Around 200 people were killed, and over 12 were missing. Many people were now living in portable houses waiting for their house to be repaired or waiting to move out. But on the bright side, many people have finished repairs and are doing great. My host family had a lot of time because they were retired and there were no children at home, so we were able to do a lot of things while I was staying at their house. On our first day we went to a privately-owned art museum called Ohara Museum of Art. This place was filled with art, mostly from Asia and Europe. There were a lot of interesting artworks and I really enjoyed walking around and admiring them with my host family. We also went to a great bridge called Seto Ohashi that connects Kurashiki with the Shikoku region; the bridge spans over 13 kilometers. We saw it up close and from a mountain called Washuzan. The next day was a special day for Mabi. This was the day where a large festival occurred that was canceled last year because of the flood damage, and this is why it was so important for the citizens of Mabi because it was a sign that Mabi was recovering. My host family was friends with the people in charge of Mabi and got most of the student ambassadors to participate in the dance parade. We walked in the parade throughout the town, dancing and having a great time. While we were at our first host family's house we went to the town hall where we met up with the staff and they brought us to a local Jinja to participate in an act called zazen. This is where we sit in complete silence with a certain posture and meditate for around twenty

minutes. It was somewhat of an exercise to keep good posture for so long but at the end it felt refreshing. After that they took us to an udon shop and taught us how to make it and we made our own udon. I gave mine to my host parents and they said it was very delicious. We later went to a place called the Olive Garden where there were many olive trees growing and a beautiful view of the ocean and islands. Another day, my host mother took me to a museum dedicated to the detective novelist, Yokomizo Seishi. He was a famous figure who created the well-known Kindaichi Kousuke detective movies and books. I even got to dress up as the character himself. My host family has a daughter and grandchildren that live in Hiroshima and we took them around town and to the local arcade. My host family and Riki Shu's host family started to become friendly with each other. They took their kids to the movies with us, brought us to the arcade and had us play with the children. My first host family really was a great family and I made many good memories with them. I will stay in contact with them in the future. I am also planning on going to their house in the future whenever I visit Japan. We then moved to our second host family and the list of fun events kept increasing.

My second host family was from Nakashodanchi. They have three children. The younger two were enthusiastic while the oldest one was more reserved. They were all really easy to talk with and they weren't at all nervous in front of me. Being such a big family made it difficult to go to places like museums because of the large number of people and coordinating everyone, but we did many other things – mostly things that would happen in a normal everyday Japanese household. We went swimming at the community pool, went to matusuris and met the mayor of Kurashiki, visited old jinjas in the middle of the night as a test of courage, and did just normal fooling around. I really

felt like a normal Japanese boy because of them and I got a taste of the norm. I liked how they treated me as they would any other person and not some special person. It made it easier to have a fun time. At home we would watch TV and listen to their favorite music while we played card games like UNO or War. They had many pets: including a rabbit, bird, and turtle and we played with them every day and took care of them. One day we went to the same mountain that I went to with my first host family, but for a different reason. In this mountain there is an amusement park that is well known in the area. This place was called Washuzan Highland. It was a fun experience, especially the bungee jumping. A fun thing happened when we went to the bungee jump ride. Several camera men from a national television company stated to record Motoharu and me while we were jumping. They were from a TV show called Tantei Knight Scoop and they were here to film a man that wanted to bungee jump while being inside a giant teddy bear costume for a comedy stunt. It was quite the experience.

The host mom wanted to take us to the place where her wedding ceremony was held because it was also a pretty famous place in Okayama. The place that she was wed is called Kourakuen. It is a big garden with a couple of buildings for people to hold their wedding ceremonies and what made it even better was the big Okayama castle in the background. After that we went next door to the Okayama castle which is also called the black castle. It is a beautiful historical building with many weapons inside. It was an architectural masterpiece. When I was with my second host family I did not go to too many historical, important, or staple Kurashiki places but I went to areas that a family would normally go to. Other than the host family activities there were activities that we did with the city hall members, too. I had already talked about making the udon,

participating in zazen and looking at olive trees but we also went all the way to Hiroshima as well. We first went to Miyajima where the famous gate in the ocean stood and the temple that goes with it as well. The wildlife was beautiful, and buildings were amazing. There were many small, humble shops lining the streets and many sold Hiroshima favorites, Momijimanjyu. After this we went to the Atomic Bomb museum. I couldn't believe how far reaching it was and how long the radiation lasted.

At the end of the 3 weeks, it was hard to leave because I got so used to being in Kurashiki, and I didn't want to leave my host families and the great experiences I had with them.