

2019 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Riki Shu

First, I am very grateful for the Heart of America Japan-America Society for providing Julie, Gavin, Ken and me this great opportunity to not only represent the Kansas City area as student ambassadors to Japan, but also supporting us in our process of making the trip as smooth as possible. This trip to Kurashiki has truly been a life changing experience and I am so grateful to the host families who were willing to let us stay in their homes and care for us.

We finally arrived at the airport and made our way to Kyoto and stayed in a hotel. Then in the morning we toured Kyoto and went to Fushimi Inari and then went on the train to Kurashiki to meet our host families. I met the Nakahara family consisting of Sanae, the mother, who was very fluent in English; Yoji, the father; Wataru, the older brother (age 9); Kaede, the middle sister (age 7), and Aoi, the youngest sister (age 5). We all went back to their home and had some delicious home cooking. Then I gave them my gifts that I had prepared for them and they were all so happy.

The next day Sanae wanted me to come along with her to buy a game that Wataru wanted to play, knowing that I loved playing games. On that night when I was playing with him, he was so surprised that I was so good at playing the games that he shared. He was so impressed that he started calling me "Riking, the king of fire." It eventually rubbed off on to the family.

Other activities I had were joining a class for calligraphy and writing my name in Kanji. I went to the arcades with the family and I won some really nice prizes. We went to a cat café; it was so amazing. I went to Wataru and Kaede's karate class and I spoke

with their English teacher. I went to a kids festival and played some games and watched the kids dance in the festival. We went to Okayama and went to the crow castle and to Aeon mall and watched a movie with Sanae Aoi. I absolutely loved being with the family as it was a new experience for me that I really felt like a part of their family and the kids' older brother. I am truly grateful.

We then arrived at Kurasho, the Kurashiki commercial high school, and we introduced ourselves to the homeroom, the classes and then we played some activities and ice breakers. We also happened to arrive on the last day of teaching for the English teacher, Eric, and watched a ceremony for his farewell. Then we made some noodles for lunch. The ESS club prepared a party for us. One of the members was actually my next host family, Miku. She wanted to be a host family due to last year's students visiting the school when she joined the ESS club.

Then I met my next host family to Ono family with Miku, the younger daughter who was the one who knew the most English; Sachie, the mother; Ikunobu the father; Ayana the older sister; and the grandparents.

On the first day we went to Shin mane Ken and stayed in a cottage. The Ono family is good friends with the Wamashita family with Gakuto the youngest kid and his father and mother and his older brother Noriaki, Ikunobus cousin and Miku's friend Ume. It was an annual trip and they planned it out for me to come with them. We went to the aquarium and I swam in the ocean for my first time. I played some fun games with Gakuto and he really got to like me. I seemed to really have impressed him that he and

his family decided that on the last day to give me a gift, despite not even being my host family. I am truly grateful that they even considered giving me a gift.

We also went to eat some excellent sandwiches, shaved ice, and desserts. When we came back, the grandmother showed me how to play music on the Koto. I also got to meet the Kurashiki Mayor and I was really nervous, but I am so happy that I could be there in the first place.

Since Miku was a member of the ESS club wanted to bring me to Eric Sensei's final official farewell party working at the school. It was heartwarming being there and I discussed with him what he would be doing in the future, but also I was kind of a distraction since he came into the class early so I had to make sure he wasn't alone sitting on the side, away from the preparations.

On my final day I went to Miku's global workshop class and it was a really nice experience talking with the English teacher. Then we went to our farewell party and I got to eat with both of my host families, dance for them and really thank them for what they did for me.

Then we proceeded with all of our host families to the train station. I was really holding in the tears while talking with my host families. The time had finally arrived. At that moment when we all proceeded to pass the train gates, Aoi, Kaede and Wataru all came running to me to give me one last goodbye and I saw Miku and Sachie tearing up while Sanae and Yoji were waving goodbye to me. Eventually I started tearing up myself and hugged the kids back one last time and yelled my last farewell with all the

gratitude and appreciation in it. Then we went our way to the hotel and took our long ride back home to America.

This experience was truly amazing and I absolutely enjoyed every second of it. I came out of Japan as a better and more knowledgeable person than I was before, and it was all thanks to HAJAS. I believe it was truly life-changing and I am so grateful for everyone who was involved. I want to go back to Japan and hope that I can see my host families again!