

2018 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Emily McAllister

I would like to start by thanking everyone involved in the program who helped with the entire process. This trip was my first time traveling abroad to another country. I highly thank the Heart of America Japan-America Society for the experience in letting me be a student ambassador and helping so much with this trip. Thank you to Patty Woods and Jan Conard for preparing us for the trip down to every detail. I would very much like to thank Hideko Schackmann for her help in some extra language preparation before the trip. A very big thank-you goes to James Benson and Tomomi Ueno who helped make everything in Japan go as smoothly as it possibly could. Being in Japan was life-changing for me, from my welcoming host families to all the trips we took and sights we saw.

I remember arriving at Kansai Airport very clearly, the excitement running through my veins and the little kid bounce as we waited for our turn to get off the plane. When we finally got our bags and got through customs, we were greeted warmly by James Benson, who we quickly came to get along with very well. He walked us through the process of getting our money, sending our bags, and guiding us to the train station. We took a train to Kyoto on which I spent the entire ride studying everything passing outside the window. After we arrived in Kyoto, we checked in at our hotel and stayed the night, excited for our adventure in Kyoto the next day. We spent the next day traveling to the many shrines and temples. I had been emailing my first host mother before the trip and she had explained to me how she was collecting stamps from all the shrines. Intrigued, when we were at *Kinkakuji*, I bought my very own stamp book and started a

collection of my own. At the end of the day we got on a *Shinkansen* (bullet train) and were on our way to Kurashiki.

We were greeted by our first host families at the train station and I was so happy I think I almost cried, which might have been a little too early. I met the Nakahara family, Sanae, my host mother, Yoji, my host father, Wataru, my eight year-old host brother, Kaede, my six year-old host sister, and Aoi, my four year-old host sister. On the ride back to their house my host mother asked a lot of questions about me and what I would like to do. Her English was very good and I was thankful that she tried to speak mostly in Japanese so that I could get a good experience, even with my broken Japanese and English mixed. My host father was very quiet but was a child at heart and was very kind. He was a factory coordinator while my host mother was a stay at home mom.

On my first full day with them I walked with my host mother and Aoi to the bus stop to drop her off for kindergarten. Afterwards, I ran some errands with Sanae to the grocery store and to the DVD rental place. Two days later my host family took me to Aoi's kindergarten festival, which was one of the biggest highlights of my trip. We dressed in *yukata* and played festival games while eating some *kakigori* (shaved ice). I was also allowed to go visit Wataru and Kaede's elementary school. The Vice Principal of the school toured me around the entire school, which was an honor and I am very thankful. I also sat in Wataru's class during recreation time where we played fruit basket and had a rock-paper-scissors competition. They also took me to the AEON mall, an enormous shopping mall, where we went school shopping and just looked around. We ran across Sanae's friend and her children and decided to all eat dinner together at a Shinkansen sushi place. It was quite the experience with two adults, a teenager, and six

kids under the age of ten. My host family also spent a day taking me to the Bikan District, which Kurashiki is well-known for. It was very beautiful and we took a boat ride down the canal. Yoji also arranged for an English tour guide so I could understand a lot more about the history of the area. One of my favorite experiences was when one of my host mother's friends invited us to a gathering at a park for somen and games. There were a lot of people and there was an actual bamboo slide for the somen. One of the families had brought a trampoline for all the kids to jump on. Throughout my stay with the Nakahara family I spent a lot of time with my host sister Aoi and got along surprisingly well with her despite the language barrier. I helped Wataru with his homework and watched TV with Kaede. I thank the family for welcoming me so warmly and heartedly into their home. When it was time to switch host families, I was very sad to be leaving the Nakahara family but was ready to meet the Komaya family.

When arriving at the Komaya residence with my host mother Sawako, I met my host brother Tomoki and my host dad Yoshihiko. I didn't meet my other host brother Masaki until later because he was at school doing extra studying. We spent the first day visiting Masaki's middle school because they were having an open school for elementary students. The school was humongous compared to middle schools in the US. It has its own tennis court as well as a kendo dojo in the middle of the campus. My host family took me to a lot of temples and shrines so I could gather more stamps. The family also had a set tea time around one in the afternoon where we drank coffee and ate sweets and snacks. Sawako took me to Okayama Castle and the mall in Okayama where we coincidentally ran into Michael (a fellow student ambassador) and his host family.

On certain days we, the student ambassadors, had scheduled trips we went on around Japan. One was to a high school in Kurashiki. We spent the day in English classes and even went to an art class as well. In the afternoon we were with the English club who set up a miniature festival where we played games, made kakigori, and wore yukata. Another day, we went on a day trip with the Kurashiki community to a Buddhist temple to learn zazen, a form of meditation. We went to an udon place for lunch and there we learned how to make udon and even took home our udon to our host families. Our last trip was to Hiroshima and Miyajima. In Hiroshima we saw the Atomic Bomb Dome and visited the museum in the Peace Park. It was very humbling to see all the artifacts and the pictures of the event. The rest of the day we spent touring around Miyajima and seeing all the temples and seeing the shops.

On our last day of our homestays we had a farewell dinner with all the families. We said our goodbyes at the station and got on our train to Osaka. We stayed the night in a hotel and spent the next day around Osaka. From there, we took a train to Kansai airport for our journey home.

This trip was truly amazing and I loved every second of it. It was more than I could have ever imagined. I've gained a greater knowledge of the world and this is a journey I never would have been able to go on without HAJAS. Every moment I spent was eye-opening and life changing. I can't wait to return to Japan.