

2018 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Kaz Brandt

After such an amazing and lovely experience, a big thank-you goes out to the Heart of America Japan-America Society for making it all happen and for preparing the student ambassadors for what we might encounter. I would like to specially thank Patty Woods, Jan Conard, and Fran Lemery for being so extraordinary in their “before Japan” preparations and for being such insightful individuals, Hideko Schackmann for being kind enough to provide me with those extra lessons in Japanese before the trip, everyone from the international affairs department in Kurashiki City for being so welcoming and sweet to all the students, Mrs. Ota and Ms. Ueno for being so kind and supportive with all of the student ambassadors, and James Benson for being patient and hilarious with the three nervous students he found in his care that first day in Kyoto. A trip to Japan has been something I’ve dreamed about since I was a small child, as I’d come to feel as if a piece of my past was left behind all those many years ago when my family was transferred from Japan to Germany. Reconnecting with the culture and people would not have happened so soon and suddenly if not for this amazing program.

When we finally arrived in Osaka after the long 12-hour plane flight, we were all understandably tired and very hungry. We quickly grabbed our bags and made our way through customs, easily finding Benson on the other side. He greeted us in his usual cheerful manner and helped us exchange our money with quick efficiency before guiding us to the Shinkansen heading for Kyoto. After the train ride and short walk to the hotel we were staying at for the night, we dropped all of our bags and went on the hunt for food. I had quickly suggested okonomiyaki earlier, my favorite Japanese dish, and

Benson happily delivered. We ate our fill, shopped for a short bit, and headed back to the hotel where we all collapsed into our beds.

We started the next day bright and early, meeting in the lobby of the hotel before heading out to explore the local area. After working off the nervous jitters, Benson took us on a little tour. We visited three different buildings- Kinkaku, Kiyomizu temple, and Fushimi Inari Taisha shrine. We were all blown away by the magnificence and beauty these places held. After we'd had our fill of fresh air and extreme heat, we made our way to the train station. The events that played out next I'll never forget, as they bring a nervous flutter even now. On the way to meet our first host families, our train became delayed by several hours. However, Benson worked his magic and got us safely to Kurashiki station. We were met by the beaming smiles of the families, and after a quick picture, separated off into the night with our new housemates.

I was quickly welcomed into the Toshiro family, who first took me to their favorite ramen shop. The discussion fell into an easy rhythm, and I found myself forgetting all the fears I had previously held. Miyu, the eldest sister, helped me find a place within the family on that first night, and while eating popsicles we all shared our first laugh of many. The trip really started for me here, as the very next day Miyu welcomed me to her school. I was allowed to participate in her English class and after school she gave me a tour of all the clubs. I was blown away by the activities, especially the tea club, who graciously allowed us to sit through a ceremony. I'll never forget the lighthearted joy I felt that day as I walked around her campus with wide eyes, taking in everything I could. I was beginning to realize just how different our student lives were.

This point was only shown further when I visited a different high school with Emily and Michael. Together we participated in 3 different classes before meeting with the English club. The club welcomed us with open arms and together we all cooked soba noodles and played festival games. I can only look back on the memory fondly; I enjoyed the day so much.

On the sixth day, Miyu, Miyu's mother Yoko-san, and I all went to Miyu's grandmother's house where we ate a delicious lunch with Miyu's aunt, uncle, and cousins. Then, after we ate our fill and had a few laughs, Miyu's grandmother helped all the girls do their hair and get into yukatas. In true grandmother fashion, she gave each person there a small allowance which almost brought tears to my eyes. She was incredibly kind to me, which made my experience later that night only better. After everyone was ready, we all hopped into a car and drove to a small festival that was taking place. Miyu and I prayed at the shrine and played festival games together. The night air held the smell of smoke and children's laughter. It was a night I'll never forget.

Another day I'll never forget was the Kurashiki day tour where Emily, Michael and I learned the art of zazen, painted our own darumen, and cut udon noodles as a gift for our host families. We all had an incredibly fun time. The next few days after flew by in a blur of shopping and hanging around the house with Yoko-san and Mugi, the Toshiro family's dog. Then, on day 11, it was time to meet my second host family. I was picked up by Norie-san, along with Ayano and Akura, who took me into their home and excitedly showed me all their toys. I was also introduced to Rin-chan, their neighbors' cat.

The first day I stayed with my second host family, they showed me a bit of their world. We watched TV together, ate, and then Norie-san took me to Ayano's dance and singing lessons. After that, Norie-san helped me into a yukata and off we went to another festival! This one was by the Bikan area in one of the train stations. I was blown away by the difference. The first festival I'd gone to was outdoors on one street, while this festival was happening on the twisting walkways of the station. The first thing Ayano and I spotted was the fish catching game and we both raced over. I had always wanted to play, and I took my chance, winning four fish before my paper paddle broke.

A day after, they took me to one of their favorite places to visit--Rabbit Island. We drove for a few hours before hopping onto a boat. When we got to the island, I was overwhelmed with the amount of rabbits. We explored the island, feeding the rabbits carrots and lettuce as we went, before stopping by the hotel on the island and getting some ice cream and kakigori.

On one of the last days I was staying with them, Norie-san took me to her parents' place where her mother was holding a cooking lesson for another group of exchange students. We all cooked a delicious lunch together! After the other students had gone, Norie-san and I sat with her parents and talked for a short bit. It would seem strange that I would remember this so clearly, but it was such a peaceful quiet moment in what had been a loud and crazy kitchen that I cannot help but look back on it.

To all the people involved with my stay, I would like to say thank you. Thank you Yoko-san, for getting to truly know me. Thank you Miyu, for being so kind and for being my friend. Thank you Ryota, for sharing a few laughs with me. Thank you Takashi-san, for being so funny and lively. Thank you Norie-san, for taking in another child even

when you have your hands so full. Thank you Ayano, for sitting with me a Rin-chan and pulling me along to show me all those cool things. Thank you Akura, for being a little ball of energy. Thank you Noboru-san, for letting me into your home for a short while. My trip would not have meant anything if it wasn't for all of you. You all pushed, helped, and amazed me. You all changed my life. Thank you.