

2018 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Michael Kim

Kurashiki and the whole of Okayama prefecture presented many new and fascinating experiences. But for any of those experiences to be had, there were numerous forces working both behind the scenes and in the spotlight; those individuals and organizations must be thanked for their assistance in making our experience a reality. On the home front, I must thank Patty Woods, Jan Conard, Fran Lemery, and Hideko Schackmann for providing the student ambassadors with all the information required for a successful venture. A huge thanks should be presented to the international affairs department in Kurashiki City, most notably James Benson, Ms. Ota, and Ms. Ueno for providing us support in Kurashiki City, without them, we surely would have been lost. The time I spent in Japan, mainly in Kurashiki City and near Okayama City, was eye-opening and the entire experience will be remembered for the rest of my life. I enjoyed every part of the experience, the fact was, I enjoyed the experience because of the company I had. My fellow ambassadors, Ms. Ota, Ms. Ueno, James Benson, and my host families made for an experience that was more than what was in front of me. They transformed ping pong from an exercise into something I miss routinely performing every night once I returned to Kansas City. The thoughts I had leaving Kansai International Airport were all blown away by what I experienced in Japan.

As quickly as the customs and immigration made us nervous, those anxieties were swept away when we met the smiling James Benson at the Kansai International Airport. We exchanged our cash and a few words with Benson and climbed onto the Shinkansen (bullet train) bound for Kyoto for our first night. That day went by like a blink of an eye, we walked to our hotel, then met up with a friend of James Benson who

attends Nara University. Following dinner and some brief shopping in Kyoto Station, we all went to bed for the long day that awaited us and our meeting our host families for the first time. There are two memorable sequential events that occurred towards the afternoon of our second day. The Shinkansen was delayed, the amount delayed, I cannot remember exactly, but I remember that we all walked out of the Shinkansen tired and worried about how the following two weeks would go. As we exited Kurashiki station we were met by the nervous and smiling faces of our first host families.

The car ride back to my first host families' home, the Miyake families' home, was full of somewhat awkward silence augmented by the fact we were all exhausted from the long day. The following days with my first host family seemed to pass by too quickly as it did with the second host family, the Arakawa family.

I should mention this: all the time I spent in Japan was significant, even the chores that I usually found mundane at home. Every day was full of new experiences too plentiful to summarize, but what I remember is how I felt after the experience. I enjoyed everything I did, because of the people I was with. Chores became something like a social event with my host families; ping pong became a routine activity I did with Chiharu, the youngest daughter in the Miyake family, and helping (but failing) to assist in any meal prep was a time for laughter with Chisato, Manaho and Ms. Arakawa, my second host family and their two daughters.

There were days and events that truly strike my mind as formative. Kurashiki or Kurashiki Commercial High school was perhaps amongst one of my favorite days in the whole trip. Kaz, Emily, and I had butterflies in our stomachs before we entered our first class. I spoke with a student and she admitted that some in her class felt the same

nervous energy that I possessed. Understanding that while yes, we were abroad and in a foreign school, the students there were suddenly seeing the foreign in front of them and were trying to communicate with the vastness that we may, or may not, be able to provide. But being able to celebrate my host brother, Natsuki's birthday, made this day truly remarkable. Perhaps, I should talk about what we did, but it was somewhat of a normal day, but except so much more than simply ordinary. I would like to thank my host family, specifically, Natsuki, for including me in his birthday celebration.

There are numerous experiences I want to relate, but in an effort to maximize the narrative, I believe it is only fair I mention the event that is somewhat of the reverse of Kurasho but almost identical to Kurasho. On the ninth day, I was lucky enough to present my life to Chiharu's middle school class; amongst my failing attempts to write calligraphy and my inability to fit into the small desk, it was a comical reverse of a large clown fitting inside a tiny car, this time, the clown was stuck in the car, unable to move. It was surreal to have the opportunity to explain my life in Kansas City and the other cities I have lived in, Atlanta, Miami, Tucson, San Diego, etc., but also humbling to have had the experience. But I would like to thank Chiharu's homeroom teacher for allowing me to go to her school and taking their English lesson time. Soon after the English class and my miniature presentation ended, I moved to my second host family, the Arakawa family.

I remember the first car ride; Manaho and my host mother picked me up and I was feeling mixed emotions, worrying of how much I would miss my first host family, the Miyake, and of what I should do in that very moment to alleviate the crushing silence. There, on the front car display, was sumo; and the first conversation was of our mutual

lack of appreciation of sumo, which gradually evolved into my getting to know my host mother and host sister Manaho. While it was a short hour, it would define my experience with my second host family, a gentle, but natural ease into the comfort of their company.

I remember meeting Tatsuyoshi, my host brother, Chisato, my host sister, and their grandparents for the first time. When walking into the grandparent's traditional style home, I was greeted by the grandmother at the front. Later, while I was moving my bags, I met Chisato who was watching television and folding clothes as I entered the kitchen. Finally, towards the end of the day, I met Tatsuyoshi, who was busy with school and took off time from cram school to host me. I would like to thank Tatsuyoshi and his siblings for taking time out of their busy schedules to show me a good time. I would also like to thank my host mother who took leave of her job to also host me, their kindness truly struck the very depths of my sixteen-year-old heart.

I can vividly recall one event that involved everyone in their family. That was the second day I was in the Arakawa family household. We made yakiniku and I attempted to assist in making onigiri with Manaho and Chisato. Despite their compliments, I can say with absolute confidence, I lacked any level of competence in shaping rice into any distinguishable geometric shape. It was at dinners in general, that everyone got together after a long day of school, or perhaps a long day of shopping or sightseeing, where everyone convened and spoke of his or her days. While this may seem somewhat mundane and unexciting, it remains to be one of the most enjoyable times I had experienced, comparable to Natsuki's birthday- honestly, I enjoyed any activity so long as I could experience it with as many people as possible.

I cannot thank my host families and everyone involved in this program enough for making this possible. Understandably I have not mentioned everything, but I must say this, Ikumi, thank you for taking me to Aeon Mall, on a school day and wasting your allowance with me on futile crane games. Thank you to Manaho and Chisato for suffering in the heat with me to see Okayama Castle. Natsuki and Chiharu, thank you for playing games with me before bedtime, and in particular, thank you Chiharu for being a good sport when I played so poorly in ping pong. Then to former student ambassadors Kurumi and Riko, thank you for swimming with Tatsuyoshi and me at Soja pool and chauffeuring me around Okayama city at night. I would also like to thank Tatsuyoshi's friends in having done karaoke with me on the second to the final day in Japan; while I admittedly did poorly, I enjoyed the absurd dancing and singing we sang together. Then to my host mothers, to the two who arguably took on the largest role in my experience, thank you for making time out of your already busy schedules to show me a good time. There are not enough words at my disposal that can express my gratitude and gratefulness to all those who assisted in this amazing experience.