

2023 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Aidan Joyce

Firstly, I would like to express my deep gratitude for all of those in the Heart of America Japan-America Society, my host families (Inoue and Fujiwara), Mayor Ito of Kurashiki City, her administration, and the office of international affairs in Kurashiki. Without their involvement, this opportunity would never have been possible for me. Seeing that my high school years had lapsed before the departure, the grace and support that I received from these organizations was extremely heart-warming and I will be forever grateful for it.

My journey with this program began in 2019 when I went to my first meeting run by the Heart of America Japan-America Society. I was encouraged to sign up for the student-exchange program through Kansas City's sister city relationship. In February of 2020, I was accepted along with my Rockhurst High School friend, Nigel Barrett, and began to prepare for the trip. However, the COVID-19 pandemic would shut down the program along with everyone's way of life.

Despite this major historical event, the society had never stopped communicating their support for my desire to go to Japan. The most devastating "no" I received was when I was told it would not be possible to go to Japan the summer before my freshman year of college. My will to go to Japan was at its lowest yet, so much so that I was heavily considering moving my future away from anything Japanese. However, I was told that there would be an exception to my situation and that I could go to Japan as a college student. I felt, for the first time in a long time, that I would be able to fulfill my dream of going to Japan.

I could share my story about Japan during COVID-19 for the rest of this paper, but I know that would fail to highlight all the wonderful experiences that I was able to have during my program in Japan. Everything was extremely well coordinated and that made my experience there so much better. This is because all I had to worry about was spending time with my host families and making memories that would last a lifetime. I think that I was able to accomplish this in the short time that I was in Japan.

Before arriving in Japan, I was able to talk with my host families over Line. This was a wonderful thing because it allowed me to break some social barriers before I met them in person. I ended up talking to both of my families every day and that became a very special time for me because of the anticipation and excitement surrounding our first meeting. I'm very glad that I chose to interact with them so early on because the initial meeting with the Inoue family was very natural and easy. It made me feel so accepted and proud of my Japanese language ability; I realized that as a result of my conversations with them, I was able to more deeply appreciate the spirit of hospitality that Japan is renowned for.

Another experience that touched me very deeply was the interaction with one of the students at the Kurashiki Commercial High School. There was a student who specifically requested a private meeting with me and another ambassador. She was interested in pursuing a college major that related to commerce. However, the most impressive part was that she wanted to study in a foreign country. I felt qualified to explain the American university system and some of the benefits she could receive if she chooses the United States as her country of study. Though it was exciting to give her advice, it made me think about how I came to this program later than expected. I realized that had my program not

been delayed, I would not have been able to help guide her towards her goal. This interaction is what the program is about, being able to exchange ideas, advice and culture to better the two communities. I feel that this interaction directly helped the community in Kurashiki, and thus, I felt that I had accomplished my goal.

Outside of the program's and my purpose, the little things are what made my trip so fulfilling. Even though I enjoy English as a subject, I never thought that I would be teaching it to anyone. When I was asked to review my host sister's summer English reading, I was a little worried that I might be a bad teacher. However, I did have experience tutoring Japanese in university, so I thought that I could translate those skill into teaching my own language. While I feel like I was somewhat successful in helping my sister, what made me feel happy was the joy and excitement I could see from my host mother. She was so happy to see me aiding her daughter that she took several photos of us while giggling and smiling with joy. Little things like summer reading meant nothing to me as a child. However, enhancing the summer reading experience for someone else taught me that I receive happiness from the success of others.

The trip to Kurashiki means many more things to me than what I can fit into an easily digestible paper. I am still in contact with both of my families and hope to see them soon during my current study abroad. My relationship with them is something I hope to have for a lifetime and will work hard to make that so. Kurashiki will always have a special place in my heart as the town that welcomed me after the years of heartbreak and disappointment. I would like to thank everyone involved with this again; thanks to you all, I was able to have a true milestone experience in such a precious and pivotal moment in my

life. I also hope that the lives of the people in Kurashiki continue to improve with this relationship and that the future ambassadors also share a similar positive experience.