

2024 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Mae Masek

The HAJAS Student Ambassador Program with Kurashiki, Japan was an experience that deeply impacted my life. As a student ambassador of the program, I met many people from America and Japan who were unbelievably kind and made this program incredible. Truly, thank you to everyone who helped assist and organize this sister city program. I hope I can share just how impactful this experience has been by sharing my memories with my host families, the Kurashiki Commercial High School visit, and the people I met through this program.

The day I arrived at Kurashiki I met my first host family, the Nakamura Family, in the train station. I was greeted enthusiastically by my host dad and sister and instantly my nerves were relieved. On the drive back home we talked about our interests and plans for the week together. I met the host mom at home and we all had an amazing time talking and laughing with each other. I loved hearing stories about how the parents met and their memories with the sister while we shared funny YouTube videos with each other. During my stay, the mom and sister showed me around Okayama to go clothes shopping, to see the sister's middle school, or to explore Okayama Korakuen. The Nakamura family was energetic and entertaining, and every day felt like a story worth telling.

After a week with the Nakamura's, it was time to pack up and meet the Ikegami family, who I'd be staying with next. I was greeted by two young girls in the family who were shy and quiet at first, but by the end of the first day they were excitedly explaining games to play with me. The mom and dad of this host family were sincere and a joy to

be around. I always enjoyed how down to earth this family was; the kids taught me games like Shogi and Karuta while the parents taught me about local food in Kurashiki. I loved looking through photo albums of the kids while the parents explained the backstory of each photo. I even learned that the host mom's family hosted a student from Kansas City thirty years ago when the mom was a kid. During my stay, the Ikegami family showed me around the Bikan Chiku area and helped me research the favorite artists that I discovered at Ohara Bijutsukan. I've learned so much about Kurashiki through this family, and I treasure the fun memories we created together.

But overall my favorite shared memory with both of my host families was seeing the ocean for the first time. With my first host family, on a weekend trip we traveled to Shodoshima and stayed at a hotel near Angel Road. We had a stunning view of the sunset, and sharing this genuine moment of peace with this family made me want to cry. The sun turned the sky a beautiful, deep pink that reflected off the waves of the ocean. Time seemed to slow down as I stood outside with my homestay sister and we watched every hue of the sunset unfold. Truly, this moment made me feel that all of my efforts to reach this point in life were worth it.

With my second host family, we traveled to the host mom's childhood home, Kojima. This was the first time the two daughters visited the ocean, so this felt like my first time seeing the ocean again because of their excitement. Seeing the kids sprint off towards the ocean to play in the water made me feel like I was a kid again with them. We wrote our names in the sand, collected seashells, and trudged through the waves. It was fun seeing the parents taking lots of photos and enjoying themselves too. I felt so at

peace in this moment and was so happy I could share this memory with the Ikegami family.

I had never seen the ocean before in my life, and I was so glad I was able to share this special moment with two families that made me feel like a part of their family. Whenever I see the ocean again, I know that I will think of these beautiful memories I made with the Nakamura and Ikegami families.

Another experience that I hold dear to me is the student ambassadors' visit to the Kurashiki Commercial High School. To be honest, I was nervous about meeting people my age and whether I'd get along with these students. But similar to meeting my host family, I was instantly relieved by the faculty's and students' warm welcome. Everyone was really upbeat and energetic, and it was nice hearing everyone practice speaking English with us. Max and I met the third year high school students by joining them in an English class. We learned about the students' birthdays, hobbies, and interests through the class activities, and it was fun talking to people our own age. Later in the day, we met the Kurashiki EMS club. I was surprised at how good everyone was at English! We got lunch with these eight students and talked a lot about our interests and school culture. We played a lot of fun games with them, like the card game ikyuusan (which is similar to the game Spoons). We had a great time getting to know the club members and their school as a whole. I hope that they continue to study English and can visit America soon. The friends that I made at this school were incredibly kind and fun to be with. I learned a lot about Kurashiki through them, and I hope they learned some new things about Kansas City through my own stories. I hope to keep in contact with these

students in the future and cheer them on as they are close to taking college exams soon.

But overall, the most impactful moments from this trip have been because of the people I've met. Thank you to Patty and Jan, who made the preparation leading up to the trip smooth. It was a joy to get to know you more and more through our meetings and through various activities after the trip. I hope we get the chance to talk with you again soon. Thank you to the Lemery family who kindly welcomed us into their home for meetings. And thanks to James Benson, as he guided us from arrival to departure at Kansai Airport and to and from Kurashiki. He always was incredibly fun to be around, and was an amazing guide through Kyoto and Osaka. We learned a lot of interesting information from him and us student ambassadors always enjoyed talking with him during meals and before activities. Thank you to Yurie, who assigned us our host families that we stayed with. I'm so incredibly happy that I was able to meet these two families, and I truly believe I'll keep in contact with them for the rest of my life. Thank you to the members of the Kurashiki Kansas City Citizens Exchange who organized the zazen meditation, daruma painting, and yacht tour. The ambassadors and I had a ton of fun on this trip talking with the members while doing these activities. To Kenta, thank you for being a great guide through Hiroshima and taking us to places we wanted to see. Your English was amazing and it was nice hearing about your life experiences.

To my host families and their extended friends and family, thank you for being so welcoming and excited to meet me. It's nerve-wracking meeting new people, let alone in a foreign language, so I greatly appreciate everyone who made the extra effort to get to know me. And to the other student ambassadors, thank you for all of the great

memories we've made together. I'm glad we were able to support each other over the long flights, entertain each other with stories, and have a great time together in Japan.

This program has provided me with an incredible once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to form long lasting connections across the world. Being given the chance to live in Kurashiki, Japan with these host families deepened my understanding of Japanese culture and enriched my life in countless ways. I believe that I grew immensely as a person because of this experience. I'm truly grateful for everyone who made this trip possible, and I can not say thank you enough. I hope the HAJAS Student Ambassador Program can continue to provide life changing opportunities for the future student ambassadors to come.