

## **2024 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Max Alvarez**

My recent trip to Kurashiki, Japan, as a student ambassador with the Heart of America Japan-America Society (HAJAS) was an unforgettable experience. More than just a trip, it was a deep dive into a familiar culture, made all the more special by the warm welcome of two amazing host families. What made this trip stand out from any other was the opportunity to live with these families, sharing in their everyday lives and building connections that went far beyond being just a tourist.

First, I want to extend my sincerest thanks to HAJAS for organizing the program, and to the incredible folks behind it: Patty Woods, Yurie-san, Jan Conard, Pegeen Blank, and the Lemery family. Their hard work and dedication made this experience possible, and I'm deeply grateful. Special thanks also go to James Benson for always being ready to help, guide, and occasionally make sure none of us got too lost! Most of all, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my host families, the Oka and the Tanimoto families. Their hospitality and kindness made me feel at home, even halfway around the world.

This trip marked my third time visiting Japan, but it was completely different from my previous experiences. Living with Japanese families allowed me to see the country in a more personal way. Every day was an opportunity to learn something new, whether it was the right way to use a Japanese washing machine or the intricacies of local festivals.

Our adventure started at KCI and after a brief layover in San Francisco, followed by a much longer-feeing flight, we finally touched down in Kansai. Before heading to

Kurashiki, we spent a night in Kyoto, and it was there that I got my first taste of Japanese summer at the Gion Matsuri festival. Jet lag couldn't keep me from being excited about the lively crowds, food stalls, and the giant floats that made their way through the streets. The next day, after a busy morning of sightseeing in Kyoto—visiting Kiyomizudera, Kinkakuji, and Kawaramachi shopping street—we were finally on our way to Kurashiki!

When we arrived, we were welcomed by smiling faces and a banner which read “Welcome to Kurashiki!” This is where I met my first host family, the Oka family: Rie, her husband Yasuyuki (Yasu for short), and their three children, Ema (3), Joji (6), and Emiri (9). Though I had been messaging Rie before my arrival, meeting them in person felt a bit nerve-wracking at first. Thankfully, those nerves disappeared quickly as the Oka family's easygoing nature and sense of humor helped me feel at ease. Yasu and I instantly bonded, and I appreciated how welcoming and down-to-earth they all were.

The time I spent with the Oka family was full of laughter and memorable moments. Every evening, after dinner, we'd sit and have long chats, and while my Japanese was fairly basic, the conversations we had were full of meaning (thanks in part to Google Translate). I appreciated how patient they were, especially with the kids, who would occasionally test out their own English skills on me. By the end of my stay, I felt much more confident with my Japanese than I ever did.

One highlight of my time with the Oka family was experiencing the Kurashiki Tenryo Matsuri Festival. Participating in the traditional “So Odori” dance was both fun and humbling, as I tried to keep up with the locals who clearly knew the moves by heart. The festival food, however, was a lot easier to master, yakitori, takoyaki, and some

much-needed kakigori (shaved ice) to cool down in the summer heat. It was a great way to dive into the culture and feel connected to the city and its people.

Another incredible part of the trip was visiting Kurashiki Commercial High School. When we first arrived, I wasn't sure what to expect, but the students and staff were incredibly welcoming. Despite the language barrier, we still found ways to communicate and bond, whether through games, shared laughter, or trying calligraphy together (which is harder than it looks). What struck me the most was the students' curiosity and friendliness. Many of them were eager to practice English, and we enjoyed comparing aspects of high school life in Japan and the U.S. Visiting the school gave me a real appreciation for the similarities and differences between our cultures and made me realize that we aren't so different after all.

After a week with the Okas, I was sad to say goodbye, but excited to meet my second host family, the Tanimotos. Takako, the mother, picked me up at Kurashiki City Hall, and soon I was introduced to her husband Katsuhide and their sons Kotaro (11), and Yuya (16). I learned that Takako and Katsuhide had lived in Germany for a few years at one point, so their English was surprisingly good, which provided me with a nice break from the language barrier. Kotaro and I bonded over baseball, video games, and anime. It turns out, love for sports and pop culture crosses all borders!

Yuya was a very smart young man and has ambitions to become a doctor. He and I had many interesting conversations as well. Yuya had been studying English for about five years and was eager to practice with me. As a result, most of our conversations were in English. We had many fun exchanges, where we taught each other new phrases and slang in our languages, as well as me helping him with his

English pronunciation. We shared a few laughs over the tricky words and even managed to cover topics from school to future plans. These conversations were a great reminder of how much we can learn from each other, even when our languages and cultures differ.

A particularly special moment with the Tanimotos was visiting their grandparents in the countryside town of Tsuyama. The peacefulness of rural Japan was such a contrast to the city streets of Kurashiki, and it gave me a chance to see a different side of the country. The grandparents shared stories about their life in the countryside and a bit about Japan's history, giving me a deeper appreciation for both the traditions and the people who maintain them.

During the second half of our trip, we had two memorable day trips organized by local groups. The first was with the Kurashiki-KC Citizens Exchange Association, who took us to a Buddhist temple where we experienced Zen meditation, which was a completely new experience for me. We also had the chance to paint Daruma dolls, which was both fun and relaxing. Afterward, we enjoyed a peaceful boat ride on the Seto Inland Sea and visited the beautiful Umashimo Olive Garden. The hospitality and kindness from the association made these experiences even more special.

For our second trip, we visited Miyajima Island with the leader of last year's student delegation to Kansas City. We took a ferry to see the iconic Itsukushima Shrine, which was just as beautiful in person. Later, we headed to Hiroshima and toured the Peace Memorial Museum. While the visit was somber and deeply reflective, it was an important experience, and I left with a greater understanding of the city's history. We

finished the day by trying Hiroshima-style okonomiyaki, which I can confidently say lived up to the hype.

As I think back on the trip, I am extremely grateful. It wasn't just the places I visited or the food I tried; it was the people who made this experience unforgettable. The Okas and the Tanimotos opened their homes and their hearts, and in doing so, gave me a rare and beautiful insight into Japanese life. I'm thankful to HAJAS for organizing this exchange and giving me the privilege of representing Kansas City in Kurashiki.

I am confident that this trip strengthened the bond between our two cities, and I'm honored to have played a part in that connection. The relationships I built and the memories I made will stay with me for a lifetime. I am eager to see how the friendship between Kansas City and Kurashiki will continue to grow in the years ahead.