

2024 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Oliver Yeager

A pivotal new chapter of my life that will impact me for years to come, is my participation in the HAJAS Student Ambassador program. During my time in Kurashiki, I gained valuable knowledge and connections that I will forever hold close. I appreciate the unique opportunity this program has granted me.

In mid-July, I landed at Osaka International Airport along with the other ambassadors. As we departed the plane, we were greeted by James Benson. Without his support, our navigation through the complex areas of Japan would have been impossible. James helped us mail our luggage to our host families and purchase our train tickets to Kurashiki. While on the train, I eagerly anticipated the announcement that we were arriving in Kurashiki. We got off the train and navigated the packed station following closely behind James. As we crossed the exit gate, I felt relieved to be greeted by a massive banner and the smiles of the Kurashiki citizens, International Affairs group, and our host families. My host mother kindly approached me and asked about my flight much like my actual mother would. After saying farewell to the other ambassadors, we walked with my first host family to the mall across from the station. Ms. Sato knew that I enjoyed music and took me straight to the record store. I was amazed to see the large selection of discs by artists that I love and struggle to find in the United States. After we finished looking around, we went back to the station to meet Yuki after school.

Yuki was a memorable part of my stay in Kurashiki. In addition to being a nice and fun person to be around, we also had similar music interests. We went to the other record store in Aeon Mall farther from the station later the next day to scout some more music. We looked through every aisle in the store which wasn't a good idea as I spent far too much money than I should have, but it was worth it.

Following the events at the Kurashiki commercial high school, which was an incredible experience meeting all the new people and socializing in the classes, I was able to attend Yuki's school as well. As we boarded the train in the morning headed for the school, I was nervous as I did not have any of my American friends or International Affairs staff members guiding me. I was on my own. We got off after the 45-minute train ride to the road leading up to the school. I saw many students walking and on bikes heading to the school. As we entered the school, groups of people were amazed to see a foreigner walking around on their grounds. Yuki and I walked to her classroom, and I was seated by the class leader, where I would spend most of the day. The class leader's name was Hiro; he was a huge help in navigating the school and getting me involved. Several teachers walked in and asked me to introduce myself in front of the class, which was the most nerve-wracking thing I have ever experienced. Using my limited Japanese, I introduced myself and where I was from. After most of the classes, there were crowds of people surrounding me trying to get my contact info. The day flew by and before I knew it, Yuki, her friend, and I were riding the train back home.

After my stay with the Sato family, it was time for me to join the Inada family. Ms. Inada, and her children Sayaka, Kiyoka, Yutaka, and Tomotaka, met me with open arms. I was blown away by their warm welcome and the kids' fun energy. We arrived at their home farther away from the city, where the beautiful rice fields and tall mountains were in the distance. The beautiful scenery was an incredible change of pace. For the next few days, we would visit many more places in Okayama. What stood out to me the most was watching a handball competition. Yutaka, the second youngest in the family, was part of a local handball team. I was able to see many different teams that competed in the arena.

There were so many activities and events I experienced that I am unable to relay them in only a few words. I want to thank the other ambassadors, the host families and

other Kurashiki citizens, and HAJAS for allowing me to be one of the few afforded the experience of a lifetime. I will never forget the people I met and the amazing time I had.

Thank You All

