

2024 Kurashiki Student Ambassador Essay: Truitt Lowrey

It was still dark in Kansas City when we reached the airport. I clearly remember standing there waiting for my flight not knowing how incredible my trip would end up being. I had never been out of the country before, so I didn't have many expectations. Though we had met briefly beforehand, I began to connect with my fellow ambassadors as we boarded our first flight. After a short layover in San Francisco, I was about to get on the longest flight I have been on so far.

When we arrived in Kyoto, I immediately noticed how different the city layout was from those in America. The architecture was distinct; you could see skyscrapers standing alone subtly in the suburbs. That evening at the summer festival, performers had built a big tower-like structure in the middle of the street to ring bells from the top. Walking into the Kyoto Nintendo store I heard the iconic theme of the first Mario game. The store's colors were its most memorable feature with red and white popping everywhere I looked. On the roof they had a flagpole and an employee to take your picture for free.

During my stay in Kyoto, I got to visit two famous temples. The first was Kiyomizu-dera which doesn't use any screws or nails: just interlocking wooden pieces to form this giant structure. The second, nestled on a turtle shaped island, was Kinkaku-ji with a striking golden color that reflected in the sunlight. As I continued my travels, beautiful architecture seemed to be around every corner. I found this to be exceedingly true for the city of Kurashiki as I made my way to the homes of my host families.

My initial nervousness about meeting the Masaki family, my first host family, melted away as soon as I started talking to them. Our meeting place was the Aeon mall. It was only 2 stories, but its breadth stretched farther than any mall I had ever seen. My host families took me to many exciting places. With one of my host families, we went to a huge candy store. Its ceiling was high and reminded me of a warehouse. Japanese candy packaging is very colorful and brought liveliness to the store. I purchased a Mario chocolate bar with three different kinds of chocolate in it.

The first thing I saw at the Kurashiki high school was a sign that said “welcome” and that’s all I felt while I was there. Another great experience that’s hard to get outside of this trip was talking with the high school students over lunch. With the students we played some card games and interview games to help them practice English. We also took part in a tea ceremony prepared by some students.

My first host family had their summer vacation while I was with them. We visited Himeji castle, which none of them had seen before. The castle’s stairs were steep, almost a climb. Our umbrellas blocked out the beaming sun but could do nothing about the heat. The breeze from the windows got progressively better as we scaled the castle; the top floor felt even cold. I was not the only one impressed by the architecture. Although I couldn’t understand what my host dad was saying, his excited expression showed his love of each floor.

Later in my trip I walked up some 1300 steps to see the Kotohira shrine. As we ascended, we came across a few different shrines. It was exhausting and I could hardly feel my legs by the end of it, but it was worth it. The view at the top was the best view I

saw on this trip. I could see the whole town and its distinct nature of houses and farmland integrated together.

With my second host family, the Bando family, I got to visit the Bikan area and toured the Inoue House. Much like Kiyomizu-dera, the Inoue House was built without screws or nails. I thought that this method of joining things together was very interesting. They even had a display where you could join together a replica of the building materials. At the house I met a high school student who was also an artist. We got to share our art with each other and talk about other artists. Even with a bit of a language gap, we were able to connect through a love and understanding of art.

My fellow student ambassadors and I put on two performances. The first was for the Japanese students that would be coming to America. We had a trivia game where one of the other student ambassadors and I would draw different Disney characters and assigned teams would guess who they are. I started out adding too much detail for our time limit on each drawing, but I got the hang of it. The Japanese students had stations prepared for us to try out some fun activities after our presentation. We repeated the performance toward the end of the trip with our host families.

Hiroshima and Miyajima were some of the last places we had the privilege of visiting as a group. The trip was worth the long drive. We took a ferry to the island of Miyajima. The deer there were so used to humans that they would let you pet their coarse fur. Perched on the beach we found the torii of Itsukushima shrine elevated from the sands on wooden posts as if it had grown out of the ground to avoid the tide. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum was humbling; the stories made my heart ache. I

had heard about the bomb before, but being at Chuo Park near where the bomb landed made it feel somehow more real.

The Okonomiyaki restaurant on Miyajima, the many bookstores we went to, a Japanese baseball game, and all the delicious restaurants that I got to try were some more of the places that I got to visit. All of them were amazing and it's hard to describe how some of the little things added up to become the most memorable moments I experienced, such as sitting down to play UNO with one of my host families. So that's why the farewell party had me fighting back tears the whole time. It was so sad to leave the people that had taken care of me, shared their homes and lives, and given something to this trip that wouldn't have been possible on a vacation or normal visit. This trip has challenged me to continue learning Japanese, granted me lifelong friendships, and will inspire future artwork. I can't encourage people enough to go visit Kurashiki. I have already convinced my best friend to come on a trip with me to Kurashiki in the future.

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