

Report back from Christchurch Kurashiki disability exchange 2010.

First and foremost I would have to say that we had a fantastic time, Ryan and I both feel so privileged to have been given this opportunity, for us it would have to be classed as one of those chances of a life time.

Next I would have to say thank you so much for sending Tania McKenzie as our travelling companion. Having someone with us that is able to navigate international airports, and who has experience with local geography, customs and expectations was a real asset and saved us no doubt many a moment of anxiety and stress! Thank you Tania! You added a whole dimension of fun to the trip I think that I could safely speak for the whole group in saying we are so glad you were there!

Having James Benson as interpreter and guide from Osaka through to Kurashiki was also invaluable. We caught about 3 trains to reach the shinkansen and then another from the shinkansen to Kurashiki. Without James I dare say we would probably still be travelling somewhere in the Japanese underground looking for a way out! Having someone that can speak the language, find out where we need to go and get us there in time to catch the necessary train to me seems crucial.

Tania may have mentioned that we sent the bulk of our luggage through from Osaka to Kurashiki by bus so that we only had to carry our overnight bags with us. This was an excellent move which we repeated on the return journey, I recommend this to future exchange's.

I am also very glad that we had the night in Osaka, as not only did it give us a chance to experience this large metropolis but it also gave us the opportunity to recoup somewhat after our 11 hour plane journey. What can I say, staying at the Hyatt, visiting the aquarium, eating at a traditional restaurant and experiencing the USJ were all highlights. Ryan was absolutely thrilled. (So were the rest of us)

I do want to acknowledge the hospitality of the Japanese sister city committee for all the organisation of accommodation, activities, transport etc and for welcoming us so warmly and their care in overseeing our stay they really are a very special group of people and it was a pleasure to engage with the different members.

On the balance between tourist and more official activities I felt there was an excellent balance. Ryan and I enjoyed the special school visit, the Fujien vist, the wheel chair basket ball (in which we took part)in fact most visits required participation rather than merely observing. I particularly found the Asahi Kasei visit interesting because of my personal interest in disability and the provision for people who have disabilities.

For tourist activities there was wandering through the Bikan area the visit to Hiroshima and Miyajima experiencing the food, the shinkansen the customs and traditions every moment was a new experience, a new sight a new sound, our senses were filled!

One slight frustration I did have as we visited some of the places set up for people with disability was the the level of English in some of the interpreters was variable and wasn't always of a high enough standard to ask more in depth questions about care for people with disabilities in Japan. I do appreciate that our interpreters were for the most part volunteers and am grateful that they came along. I did enjoy the English conversations that I had with them.

For me a personal highlight and insight was talking with my homecare mother Hiromi through an interpreter about our struggles and cares with caring for a special needs child.

We came to the conclusion that disability wasn't just ourselves, or our community or our country, but that it was in the whole world and affected people of every country, there was something quite special about that conversation as we realised that we have the same concerns and not only is that felt by family members but that a community in health does rally around and does what it can to help.

Yes thank you for giving us the opportunity to home stay. Our home stay hosts, the Onishi Family, Michiharu, Hiromi, Koudai, Misaki, and Takahiro, were wonderful. I am so glad to have met them and had the privilege of spending the weekend with them to experience a little of Japanese life style but more importantly to make those 'people connections'

We were very spoiled with Hiromi's beautiful Japanese cooking and being taken to a local temple and surrounding garden and the next day to Okyama castle and garden. They looked after us so well and made us feel so very welcome and at home.

Michiharu and the boys were lovely in their approach to Ryan, they played some board games with Ryan and there was much laughter.

And also Michiharu was so good with Ryan. Ryan had a 'Moment' at the temple garden and Michiharu able to distract him by showing him how to ring the temple bell and we moved on from there.

Ryan had a lot of fun when we all ate at Coco's family restaurant we were able to be quite free and were all being a little crazy with our eating utensils, we have the photo's to prove it!

Misaki was also gorgeous, and of course it was Hiromi and Misaki that came to New Zealand a couple of years ago with the Sister City Disability Exchange scheme. It was lovely to see their photo's from New Zealand and also show photos that we had taken of our own home and family along with some postcard pictures of Christchurch. Those photos were a big conversation helper.

One thing that a previous New Zealand exchange student had done was to make up some personal business style cards on the computer and have them laminated to give out to various people. We heard of this idea just a few days before leaving and didn't quite have the time to make some up I would suggest it as a really worthwhile thing to do for future exchanges if they feel inclined. And also suggest that those packets of small Mars bars, Moro bars etc are useful to take to give out individually as gifts especially to groups of children. We did have some of those!

Finally on behalf of Ryan and myself I would like to thank Independent Fisheries for their generous sponsorship. Without which such a trip would be beyond even considering. As I said at the start of this report we feel so privileged and also we have been made so much more aware of another people and way of life it all really feels most extraordinary indeed almost surreal. We have made a few Japanese friends here in New Zealand as a result of our trip, started to cook a few Japanese meals, are looking forward to meeting the Japanese disability exchange to Christchurch in 2011 and are wondering if one day we will return to the Land of the Rising Sun – life does have its surprises!

Annette Burnett.

Ryan Burnett's mum and carer.