

Youth for Understanding Essay 2010
By Dorian H.

Embrace your ethnicity, appreciate the culture you were born into, and be grateful for the world around you. This mantra, an extension of one of my strongest beliefs is something I have adopted through my experience in Japan.

Although I've always had a respect for all cultures and people, my opportunity for student exchange only strengthened this reverence and gave me a greater perspective on the world. It's an amazing thing that happens when you're thrown into a culture, an unknown, a place you've never been, and then attempt to function like a working part of the society.



At a glance this seems like a daunting task to any person, let alone a high school student. That vulnerability and unsettling “what if” hung over my head the entire time, starting from the moment I received the letter saying I'd been accepted. This is what this trip is all about. Not the bragging rights, or the good remarks on your college application, it's the experience and personal discovery that becomes the real benefit of the whole process, and by far the most amazing transformation I'd ever been through.

My biggest support, and greatest gain from my trip, was my new family. Formally, they are referred to as my host family, but in my heart, they are just like I said, my own, a second haven of love and comfort, given without hesitation, and to a stranger! Needless to say the love was reciprocated by me, and it took only a few days to feel fully integrated. The fact that I was there on exchange quickly took its place in the back of my

mind, and was soon replaced by a cognizant reality that I was no longer an exchange student, but part of the Sakurai family.

I felt like I'd been there many times before, like I had known them forever. Every morning I would wake up and walk down the stairs facing the kitchen to see the bright,



smiling face of my host mom, Kimiko, and to my right, the joyful face of my 3 year old host brother, Ryunosuke. On the weekends, these faces were joined by the kind face of my host dad, Eiichi, always laughing and playing with Ryu-chan.

Our family life together was never stressful or awkward. We always found something to laugh about. If we weren't laughing, we were talking. The language barrier made things easygoing, knowing that we were all trying to understand each other, even my little brother, who had his own language, half English and Japanese, we all had a good time trying to decipher.

The little moments made my trip worthwhile; going to the store, the library, even the gas station, every time we left the house I discovered something new. I met all of my host parent's friends, my host brother's preschool friends, and made high school friends of my own. It's safe to say that I had made my mark on someone, throughout the surrounding area that I lived in. The immeasurable kindness and willingness to let me in their lives gave me a great sense of belonging. Its funny how sometimes I would forget I was a foreigner all together, I never felt Japanese, but I also never felt different.

While I'm sure I didn't learn everything, I did get a great glance at the Japanese culture, and history that was all around me. Living in Kita Kamakura, I was surrounded by shrines and temples, most only a few minutes walking distance from my house. I learned a lot about Japan, but while I was learning all of this, I also learned a lot about being an American. Using the similarities and differences of the two countries helped me to appreciate my stay in Japan, but also appreciate my life in the United States.

My entire stay was filled with extraordinary moments, which to one person may seem small and insignificant, were in reality to me, what made my life in Japan so memorable. The jokes, the dancing, the nicknames, the people, the food, the music, the history, the stores, everything, all of it became one amazing experience I could have never imagined.

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By Dennis H.

Before leaving, I understood a miniscule amount of Japanese. I spoke even less. My understanding of Japanese culture was limited to the hearsay going around as a result of the worldwide expansion of Japanese animation. Yet as my month-long stay in Japan approached, I felt neither anxiety nor fear. In order to dispel the negative emotions from my mind, I held tightly to one wish: A wish that this trip would allow me to learn in a way that I had never learned before, while also building new bonds and relationships. My wish has come true.



Of all the people I met on my trip, the people helped me the most were my host family. I was very lucky to have been placed in a young, energetic family, which made my stay all the more enjoyable. I cannot recall a

single moment where I felt unhappy during my stay. Each member of my family was extremely pleasant to be with, and they were all very patient as well. Each time I misunderstood something because of my limited understanding of Japanese, they would be sure to set me back on the right path as soon as we were all finished laughing.

They took me out to play and to go sightseeing almost every weekend, even introducing me to new activities such as wakeboarding in Lake Biwa, the largest lake in Japan. In addition to guiding me around the kansai area, my family also helped me assimilate into everyday life in Japan. I was able to routinely help with grocery shopping, prepare whatever part of dinner I could and clean the house with the rest of the family.

I was also very fortunate to have a host grandmother who was relatively young and able to guide my journey to the temples, castles, and other cultural landmarks of Japan. Of all my family members, she was probably the one who taught me the most about traditional Japanese culture and I admire her greatly for taking such a large role in my homestay even though she did not speak a word of English.

However, overall, I feel my most memorable experience of the entire trip was my time at Japanese high school. School was where I was able to experience firsthand the life of a Japanese teenager and interact with people my own age, since my host family's children were very young. I remember the school festival especially fondly because I was allowed to participate in a play about Doraemon and appear on stage in front of my new friends. The teachers and students were all very friendly. Because of them, my time at school felt like only four days, not four weeks.

When I left my home in June, I had a narrow view of the world, and I didn't know much about the world beyond America. Now that I have returned, I understand the graciousness, the mutual respect, and the great devotion that is found throughout Japanese culture. I now know more about Japanese history and life than I would ever have learned if I had just stayed at home this summer. This trip has taught me not only about Japanese culture, but also about the world, and life in general. I now feel more confident in everything I do and I am much more open to new experiences. I feel that my trip this summer will be a bridge to further



travels to foreign countries in the future to learn even more about the world. Thank you, Mitsubishi Electric, for giving me this opportunity to expand my world.

Youth for Understanding Essay 2010
By Katherine K.

My name is Katherine and I am currently a freshman at Miami University (Ohio). These past few weeks have been both overwhelming and stressful with meeting new friends, joining clubs, playing Division 1 field hockey, and giving it my all in the classroom. So far it looks as if I am just another normal college student, but after spending my summer as a foreign exchange student in Japan I feel much more prepared and matured. Not to mention I now know so much about a completely different culture than I did before the summer. I can easily say that my time in Japan was the best, most rewarding time of my life.



The bonds formed with my host family, school friends, and Youth For Understanding friends is one that can never be broken. From the very first orientation in Fishkill, NY, I instantly made connections with the other students. All of those friendships, and more, stayed true through the next orientation in San Francisco. I can go on and on about the friendships I made on this trip but what more important is what I learned and how I grew as I person from it.

I applied for and accepted this scholarship with no knowledge of the Japanese language. After a much needed beginner course in San Francisco, I was placed in an environment that I knew very little about, couldn't speak the language, and was thousands of miles away from all my family and friends. At first it was so much to digest and it was hard to accept that all communication with my loved ones would be cut very

slim, but it didn't take long for me to feel like another member of my host family and feel at home, somewhat.

Everyday of my time spent in Japan was another adventure; from visiting the famous Kumamoto castle, going to school with my host sister, and eating all the unique dishes placed before me (to this day I still miss the food in Japan).

Although I was so far from home I found that I was so busy with host family and friends that I had little time to be home sick. In fact, being in a different country on my own made me feel so independent and grown up. That is definitely one of the things I noticed most since my return home, my maturity level has significantly raised. For me, it was perfect timing, right before the most important four years of my life.



As I previously mentioned, yet another positive of this experience is how independent I now feel. Here at college I frequently hear people cry and complain about how much they miss their friends and family back home. For me, I have learned how to enjoy myself without them and adapt to my new and current surroundings. It's not that I don't love and miss my friends and family very much, but I have learned that true friendships will last no matter how many miles are between you.

It hard to express my feelings on paper, but I can say that the friendships I made and the experiences I had this summer were ones that I will cherish for the rest of my life. I have developed a new interest for international studies and am interested in doing anything possible to give back to the generous people who made my trip possible. If you're reading this as a student deciding whether or not to travel abroad, I'm give you my whole hearted opinion, do it! You'll never regret this once in a lifetime opportunity, I know I don't.

