

Donnie Chang

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Hello! My name is Donnie Chang. I was the high school exchange student to Asahikawa from 2006 to 2007. Before going to Japan, I had only been outside of America for a maximum of 3 months – never a whole year. It was my senior year of high school and what a better way to finish my high school career than to study abroad.

When I arrived in Asahikawa, I was greeted by my first host family, the Yamada family (Hikaru Yamada is one of the junior high exchange students for spring 2012). The second day I was there, the Yamada family took me to a matsuri (festival). I had always dreamed of experiencing a matsuri, and I got to experience one right off the bat! The Yamada family took me to different places in Asahikawa while I was staying with them – onsen (hot springs), Okinawa, hanabi (fireworks display), the beach, amongst others. I am really grateful that I had such a wonderful host family!

In total, I stayed with 5 different host families. A couple of them I stayed with for just a week while the next host family was getting ready for me to move in. All of them were very welcoming and accommodating. I am very appreciative of them for taking such great care of me!

While I was staying in Asahikawa, I went to Ryouin Senior High School. To get there, I would have to take two different buses. I remember the first day I went to school; I stood in front of all the students and staff and made a short speech to introduce myself. I felt very nervous since my Japanese was very limited. I made a lot of fantastic memories while I was at Ryouin. I made friends, got along with the faculty. At Ryouin, there was another exchange student named Nate; he was there with another program. I feel that having another exchange student there definitely made things easier on me – I was lucky.

Classes at Ryouin were interesting. Sometimes for English class, I would be asked to help out and teach a part of the chapter. Now I know what teachers feel like when they have to prepare course material! Other classes I participated in were home economics, biology, mathematics – I spent most of my time in the library learning Japanese with the teaching staff. While at Ryouin, I also participated in the sports festival – my class won the dodge ball tournament! Toward the end of the year, one of my friends' designs was chosen to be painted in the courtyard of the school. She asked if I would like to help her paint it and I readily agreed. After we finished painting it, we got to write our names in the corner of the artwork. I was glad that I had the chance to leave a bit of myself at the school.

Besides going to school, I participated in a lot of activities in my free time. The second week I was in Asahikawa, the exchange students from a different program invited me to

attend their 2-day camp. While some of the exchange students were from America, there were a few from Thailand, Venezuela, and Malaysia. Who knew I would be making friends from different countries in Japan! The Sister Cities Committee in Asahikawa also threw me a birthday party while I was there! I was so happy because I did not expect anything of that scale. All of the committee members came; we played games, ate delicious cake, and opened presents. My host family also made me an ice cream cake!

Another place I went to while I was in Japan was Sapporo. My second host family took me there to visit their relatives. While there, we went to see the light sculptures. We also went up the TV Tower – you can see everything from up there! I also distinctly remember buying melon-flavored chocolate candy there. For New Years, my host family made soba noodles from scratch! It was fascinating to watch and tasted so delicious. Back in Asahikawa, I had the chance to go to Asahiyama Zoo and see the variety of animals they had there. My host families all took me to different places and experience different kinds of food. I feel very lucky to have had 5 host families!

A week before I was go to back to America, the Sister Cities committee members and the mayors of Bloomington and Normal flew over to Japan to celebrate the 45th anniversary of the Bloomington-Normal-Asahikawa sister cities. My mother flew over as well. For the duration of the week, we participated in many activities such as mountain climbing, visiting a university, and attending celebration dinners. It was a great way to end my year in Asahikawa.

It has been 5 years since I came back from Asahikawa, Japan. Looking back, I feel that I had a great opportunity to change and grow as an individual. Of course I got homesick and felt frustrated when I couldn't communicate with my peers, but I learned the language and I learned to appreciate the chance I was given. I could not have enjoyed my time in Asahikawa if it wasn't for my host families, the Sister Cities committee members, my friends and my teachers. If I had another chance to study abroad in Asahikawa, I definitely would take it. I would also recommend anyone else considering study abroad to take the chance. By doing so, you will grow as a person. I know I did.

