

My stay in Japan changed both my personality and my perceptions of the world. Before I left I thought I could predict how study abroad would change me; I'd become more independent, like different foods, learn to take off my shoes as soon as entered the house, but the thing about staying in a different culture is that you can't predict how it will affect you, and that makes it all the more special.

I've been interested in Japanese culture since elementary school. Around third grade cartoon network started showing the anime *Naruto* and it instantly became my favorite. Once I was introduced to *Naruto* I couldn't wait to watch other anime and eventually read manga, which is where my original interest in Japan was formed. I don't watch anime much anymore but I'm still fascinated by Japanese culture and language.

My first experience with the sister cities committee was second hand through my fifth grade teacher. He told us stories of when he went to Japan and even brought blueberry gum to class. (I now know that blueberry gum isn't exactly a staple of Japanese life, but it still counts) He told us about the junior high trip, which I proceeded to go on during the summer of 2010. My junior high experience was so positive I couldn't wait to go back. I originally applied to be the exchange student for the 2014-2015 year but it was probably for the better that I was chosen the next year as it gave me time to mature and to see read that year's amazing students blog updates which really helped my prepare. My being and exchange student wasn't a spur of the moment decision like it is for a lot of students, but it being premeditated didn't mean I wouldn't soon learn just how much I didn't know.

I realize now that I may not have given the best first impression on my first day of school. Trying to be semi-formal for the speech I was giving I had chosen a dress that I deemed to be modest. It wasn't until later that I realized that anything that showed shoulders wouldn't be considered formal or modest. This resulted in my vice-principal giving me his blazer before my speech, which I felt confused about for quite some time. The first weeks were filled with confusion but I eventually began to understand how the school worked, and got to know my classmates, who would turn out to be some of the nicest, kindest, most positive people I have met in my life thus far.

Though I could barely grasp their course material teachers supported me and helped me to the best of their abilities. Because you stay with one class you really get to know your classmates as a sort of family, but I think that sometimes the teachers place in these families are underestimated. Nearly every day my history teacher would check in with the students in my class after classes ended. Looking back I'm so grateful for all the teachers who supported me during my time at Ryukoku.

At first a lot of my male classmates wouldn't talk to me, but I quickly realized that they didn't talk much to the other girls either. As the year progressed I like to think that I wore down some of their walls. I found myself joining a number of friend groups, eating with one group,

talking in the morning with another. This let me meet a lot of different, yet equally amazing people. They were the ones who really made the experience meaningful. It's hard to imagine that if I hadn't participated in this program I wouldn't have met them.

I like to think of different aspects of my life in Japan as different families and like my class I also found a family in chorus. Being with the same six, eventually nine, people, for three hours a day six days a week is a surefire way really get to know a group. My friends in choir taught my oftentimes obscure slang, and I taught them English. Chorus was a place I could be really open.

Another huge part of my experience was my host families. I had three families over the course of the year. I grew really attached to all of my host siblings. It was hard to switch between families because it meant leaving one family behind for an unfamiliar family; however, I got used to the transitions. I had unique experiences with each family, for instance with my first host family my host siblings and I would watch Doraemon. I'm not sure how liked it better Keiichiro and Narumi or me. With my second host family we would have tea time, drink out of beautiful cups placed on matching saucers. My third host family took me to different onsens. I could go on and on about my host families and how much they helped me, but I'm not confident that those feelings can be expressed in words.

The sister cities committee was also very supportive answering questions during my monthly meetings, introducing me to former exchange students, and being a group that understood my position of being an American attempting to integrate into Japanese culture.

Being an exchange student changed me but not just in the ways I'd imagined. I not only became more confident and independent, but also more open to making mistakes. Being from a different culture and just having light colored hair helped me become comfortable in my own skin. While I tried to embrace Japanese culture, I realized that especially in large public settings where people didn't know me, I was always going to stand out. I also became more flexible to change I was very begrudging about my first switch in host families, but was able to be more accepting of the next switch.

Even after ten months there are still a lot of aspects of Japanese life that I don't understand. But I plan to continue studying Japanese at Willamette University. I would love to back to Japan sometime in the future and because I know there are more adventures to be had.

This experience has changed me for the better, and I am eternally grateful for the opportunity that was granted me.



