

## REPORT BY MITCHELL RATCLIFF (Exchange student 2017-2018)

My journey as an exchange student was something that I never thought possible. I've always known that I wanted to travel to Japan and maybe even live there, but for that opportunity to come so quickly was a welcome surprise. I grew so much as a person and learned a lot about who I want to become.

I first heard about the Sister Cities Committee from my friend Nick Modine (who later became an exchange student as well). He told me about the Junior Ambassador and the High School Exchange programs. We weren't able to go on the Junior Ambassador trip in the same year, but it ended up working out better. I had an amazing time there and knew from the beginning that I would also like to apply for the High School Exchange program. Those 2 weeks on the Junior Ambassador trip helped me to learn a lot about what life in Japan is like, which helped me a lot in the whole process.

The time leading up to leaving was spent preparing in all ways. I learned a lot about Japanese language and culture. As well as studying with Mrs. Wilson, I also went to Japanese Saturday School at Metcalf School in Normal. I quickly got a head of that class, but it did still help. Also during this time, I hosted a Japanese Junior High Schooler. Meeting him and all the other people on that trip helped me practice my Japanese and had a lot of fun doing it. I would recommend to anyone to become a host family. It is an amazing opportunity!

When I first arrived in Japan in August of 2017, I took part in the 55<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration. We toured around Tokyo and Kyoto, but the real fun started in Asahikawa. I had a lot of fun getting to know the committee members from Bloomington. It was an amazing experience to see the two committees and citizens of each town interact and come together. It really shows that people from all walks of life can come together and learn from each other.

School life was one of my favorite things. I struggled at first to talk to people, but the better my Japanese got, the closer I got to my friends at school. I joined the kendo club and I loved every second of it. My school has one of the best kendo clubs in Asahikawa and I learned so much. I even got to compete in a tournament. I wanted to be a part of something that was important to Japanese culture and also be able to take what I learned from that club and be able to take it back with me to America. School work was a little harder because of the language barrier, but the teachers helped me a lot and were so gracious with me. I was very lucky that my homeroom teacher was the English teacher. She helped me to get through tests, and speak with all the teachers, until I was able to communicate better by myself. She let me teach a few English classes, which helped me to see what it would be like to teach them English. I've known for a while that I want to go to Japan and teach English as a second language, and this experience helped me a lot.

Along with school activities and responsibilities, I was an ambassador. I used almost all opportunities to learn about Japanese life and exchange lots of culture points with people. One of my most favorite memories was when I went to a cultural exchange seminar. I saw a few of my friends that I met while I was on the Junior Ambassador trip and made a few more friends. There were lots of people from all around the world. It was an incredible experience and I hope that I can go back one day. About once a month, there was something going on with the Sister Cities Committee in Asahikawa. Usually I had to make a speech, which really helped me a lot with my public speaking. I became very close with a few of the committee members and had lots of fun.

My host family was absolutely amazing! I only had one host family, but it turned out to be better in the end. I grew very close with my host family and they helped me so much with my language skills. Without them, I would not have improved as much as I did. I also taught them a lot about the English language and American culture. Even if I didn't know the answer, I would always try to find one. I really enjoyed teaching them about my culture and it taught me that I want to go back and teach English in Japan; whether that's as an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) or as a full-fledged teacher. I also did so much with my host family. We would go to events around town and traveled all around Hokkaido. I can truly say that they have become family to me.

Life in Asahikawa was amazing in every way. The people were so kind to me. But the people I met were not just from Asahikawa. I met several people from around Hokkaido and Japan. I even spoke with people from Korea, Germany, Indonesia, Finland, America, and New Zealand. I also did some things with another exchange program group. One of the students went to my school. One of my favorite events that I did was an Intercultural exchange seminar. Some schools and exchange programs did some presentations on their own programs. I met an ALT from Canada, and some

students from around Asahikawa. The consulate from Sapporo even came to the event and talked about the importance of accepting other cultures and experiencing them for ourselves. He was also really funny and I really enjoyed his talk. One thing that came up at the event was smiling. A lot of the students wrote down smiling when asked about accepting people. It's a small gesture that can mean so much to people. It shows kindness to people and as someone who was an exchange student, it connected with me because even though you love the place that you are at, it can be very intimidating when you might be the only person who speaks your own language. It can be encouraging for people to smile at you when you're in an environment that you aren't familiar with. Sometimes it was hard to talk with people or to find my way around, but I never gave up and was determined to do a great job.

I have grown so much from my time in Japan. I've matured a lot since I heard about the junior high school program 3 years ago. I've grown to be more patient, understanding of people, and determined. I have learned to set goals, figure out all the steps that I need to take, and then have the understanding and responsibility to get them done and achieve my goals. I've learned the importance of education and that to achieve our goals we must first learn how to achieve them. I've learned better time management and how to make the most of my time. Riding busses everywhere really helped me with that one. I've learned that keeping my room and life clean will help me to be more successful in studying and doing projects at home. I used to be very shy, but because I've stepped out of my comfort zone more times than I can count, I have opened myself up and am more willing to talk and interact with people that I don't know. I have so much appreciation for Japanese culture and my own culture even. I love Japan. It has become my second home and can't wait till I can go back again. I can't thank you all enough for the help and support that you have given me. I will take everything that I have learned from this amazing experience and will hold onto it for my whole life. I will use my experiences to connect with people from around the world and will try to push for more people to study abroad and explore what the world has to offer. I hope that I was a great ambassador for the Sister Cities Program. I will continue to promote the wonderful program to students of all ages.



With Mayor Nishikawa and the members of committee



With classmates



Ready for KENDO match



With host brothers



Dance parade at Summer Festival