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Sister Cities Trip: Takaoka Japan

When I discovered the opportunity to take a foreign exchange trip to Japan in the summer of 2015, I jumped at the once in a lifetime chance. The trip was everything I hoped it would be. It offered me a chance to expand myself and my horizons through gaining a better understanding of the Japanese culture. I had always been interested in the Japanese culture having attended a Japanese-American elementary school as a kid. Growing up in such a diverse environment made me a more curious and open minded individual. This trip to Japan allowed me to harness my curiosity and fully immerse myself in the rich Japanese culture.

The trip began with a long flight to the city of Tokyo, Japan. Instantly, I was overwhelmed at the airport. The smells, sights, and tastes were all entirely different from what I was accustomed to in America. I was too nervous to even buy something at the gift shop for the worry of not being able to provide the correct amount of yen. After the flight and bus ride to Tokyo, we spent the night at the Shinagawa Prince hotel. The hotel was beautiful and full of young people exploring the city. We went to bed that night truly excited for the weeks to come. After a breakfast at the Japanese buffet in the hotel, we left for the Shinkansen bullet train to travel to the city of Takaoka to meet and live with our host families. The train ride was extremely convenient and comfortable; it amazed me how quickly the train was moving in such little time.

After arrival, we attended the welcome ceremony where our group performed our country dance and spoke our introduction in Japanese. I was definitely nervous about getting the introduction right in order to make a good impression on both of my host families. I had two host families since I was vegetarian to make the burden easier on them- I stayed with the Nomachi family for the first week and the Oohashi family for the second week. My first host sister was Inori-San, a kind senior whose bonded with me over dance right away. We both spent time getting to know one another and each other's cultures. She taught me the many customs they practiced in their home, such as saying Itadakimasu before meals, sharing the bathroom with the rest of the family, eating traditional Japanese meals on the low-rise table on the floor, and more. I especially bonded with the grandmother of the family. Though she knew not one word of English, she would try her best to communicate Japanese customs to me. In the mornings, we would often sit together on the floor peacefully drinking tea as the rest of the household got ready around us. With the Oohashi family, my host mother spoke much better English than my host sister, Yume-San, so we would often communicate through her. In this process, I ended up learning much Japanese and Yume-San improved her English.

Through living with the Oohashi and Nomachi family, I learned a great deal about Japanese familial roles, food, religion, and daily life. In a normal small town Japanese family, the father is usually the head of the family who spends most of the day at work. The mother, who often also works, is also expected to maintain the household by cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children and grandparents, as is common for the grandparents to live with the parents in Japan. A regular Japanese family is always busy and on the go. They are all focused on either school or their jobs, and thus the family as a whole stays up late into the night taking care of their duties as a member of the household and community.

Families in Japan are either Buddhist or Shinto, though much more commonly Buddhist. They usually have a temple room in their home that they take great care of. Shrines are the Shinto and Buddhist pace of worship. In Tokyo, our group had the opportunity to visit Meiji Shrine; the shrine was incredible large and beautifully crafted. The families also take part or attend a couple Japanese festivals during the year, an example being the Goinsai Festival in Takaoka. I had the opportunity to get dressed in a yukata and dance on the streets for an hour. Afterwards, we strolled around the festival and tried many of the different foods they were selling on the streets.

The food was as delicious as the rest of the food I had been enjoying during my stay in Japan. Though I am a vegetarian, I rarely had trouble finding foods to eat when we were in Tokyo or Takaoka even though much of Japan's food is fish-based. Something else I also learned is that families in Japan focus on eating healthy meals in order to maintain a healthy physic. The mothers would cook and serve small portions of many foods during meal times. Often, to avoid offending my host families, I would try to eat all of the food I was given on my plate and thank them graciously. The food was usually picked from their gardens and vegetables or fish based, making it very healthy to consume.

During my stay in Takaoka, I attended Nishi High School and sat in on some of the Junior and Senior classes. There are only three grades in a Japanese high school which is something that definitely disoriented me at first. The high school itself was a three story building with open spaced classrooms filled with desks and one main chalkboard the teacher would write on. Unlike in America, the teachers would travel from room to room depending on the class and the students would stay in the same class all day. However, my schedules were different from the students who attended the school. I was only assigned a couple classes to sit in on during the day in order to avoid getting overwhelmed by all of the Japanese in the classrooms. Other than English class, my classes were all in Japanese. I was assigned to a student who would pick me up in the foreign exchange room and take me to my classes. She was incredibly kind and explained what was happening in all the classes for me, sometimes even drawing pictures and charts to make difficult lessons easier for me. I became friends with many of the girls in my classes. They were all extremely kind, respectful, and understanding.

Something I observed by attending classes in Japan is how much respect the student had for each other, the teachers, their school, and communities. A small example lies in how the school did not have any custodians or janitors. Instead, the students were expected to clean up their own school during the day or after school as a lesson in respect for their learning environment. Consequently, they had a strong sense of morals and ethics in terms of keeping their school a positive place to be.

Overall, my trip to Japan was an eye-opening experience. I was able to fully immerse myself in a culture I had always been interested in. I came to love the Japanese culture after having lived there for three weeks; I hope to continue my study of Japan by taking a Japanese class at my school and joining our Japanese club. I am truly grateful for the opportunity Sister Cities provided me to travel to a country I had always wanted to learn more about. Having stayed in Japan for foreign exchange has made me a more educated and open-minded individual, something I hope to carry with me for the entirety of my life and career.