

Sam Dvorak

Reflection on Chapman Exchange Program 2015: Takaoka

When we arrived at Tokyo Station, to say that all of the students were all a bit overwhelmed would be an understatement. None of us had met our host families yet, there was chaos around us all, and the language barrier was already growing to be a bit frustrating for five out of the seven members of the travel group. Despite all of these troubles, I couldn't have been more excited for what the next two weeks would hold for me. The bullet train ride to Takaoka was as efficient and orderly as I expected. When we arrived in the city and were greeted by Nick and Ms. Kubota, who both immediately felt us feel at home. When we arrived at the welcome party and danced to "Cotton Eyed Joe" and met our host families, I was very eager for the experience that would await me, even after discovering that the Minato family, although they were the nicest people that I have ever met, could speak very minimal English. But, hey, I couldn't speak any Japanese so they were bringing much more to the plate than I was. The speeches at this welcome party from the mayor and the various other individuals from the Takaoka were translated through Nick, and were genuinely heartfelt. I woke up the next morning at 5:15 AM, and prepared to go on a run. This run around the beautiful scenery surrounding my house secured any nerves that I had about the trip in general. Riding her bike along with me for this run, my host student, Sera, gave me direction in order for me to return to our home safely.

The first day of school was nothing that I had expected. As we approached the school, everyone who I passed waved and yelled, "Good morning!" At 9:30, we headed to the city office and had a great meeting with the Mayor of Takaoka. His English was very good, and he made sure that all of us were enjoying our stay so far during the trip. After a brief tour of the school, we entered the main gym of the high school, with all of the students lined up in neat rows. I can't even describe the amount of heat in this room. I was sweating as soon as I walked in. After walking up to the stage and embarrassingly presenting our speeches and self-introductions, the student body responded very respectfully and enthusiastically. That night, I unpacked my suitcase and handed out gifts to my host family. They were a huge success, and everyone loved what they received. The next day at school, the highlight of my day was speaking with the English club. With every group starting out by asking, "Do you have a girlfriend?" and then hilariously bursting out into laughter, it was a very fun time.

Several nights later was the first night where I felt completely home at my host family's home. If anything, they felt more like family than anything that I had ever experienced before. Being a former Okonomiyaki cook, my host father prepared the most delicious meal that I had ever eaten. That night I wrote that: "I am not sure how I will be able to leave my great, loving, friendly, hospitable family." I could have thrown in about 15 more adjectives in this sentence, but that still would not do the Minato family proper justice.

The following morning, we headed to Fushiki Elementary School and had a great tour of the school. By far, the most memorable part of the journey to this school was Physical Education class. We played banana tag, a foreign concept to us all, along with partner tag, dodge ball, and Rock, Paper Scissors. I will never forget looking to my write and seeing Nick battling it out with kids in a game to prove who is strongest. I don't believe that he ever let any of the small children win. While on the topic of schools, we were also able to visit Kogei High school. This technical school was in phenomenal shape and I was very interested in learning about the many different trades in which students could participate. We had a wonderful tour from a teacher at the school, and the principal appeared to be pleased to meet us. We continued to travel with the Takaoka city office that day, and were able to create wind chimes and visit a very nice teahouse. That night was a big one. We attended Goinsai, however, Nathan and I held the notion that we would not be dancing. However, after several misinterpreted conversations, we were lined up at a temple, getting ready to dance. Three wonderfully hilarious boys from Nishi High School refreshed our memory on the dance, and helped us out the entire time. The bond that we shared with these three will be one that I will not be able to forget.

The next morning, my host student, Sera, and took a road trip to Kanazawa with Nathan's host family. We were able to view the ninja temple, which was quite the feat of engineering with elaborate traps at every corner. We were also able to visit Kanazawa Castle and a beautiful, picturesque garden. It was a great trip, and we all had a great time squeezing three large boys in the back of a small Japanese car created to seat two people.

Several days later, my time in Takaoka was winding down. My family treated me out to a very special night. We went out to a sushi restaurant close to Nishi High, and that was a great experience. Something about food constantly rotating around you made me very happy. We continued our great night by moving onto bowling. I'm not a great bowler, but my game was especially off this night. What normally would have made me frustrated did not at all. I was in the company of some of the greatest people who I had ever encountered. We finished our night by renting out a karaoke room. Of course, everyone in my host family was an excellent singer. Even though I am arguably the worst singer to ever step foot on Japanese soil, they loved and enjoyed my participation.

Saying goodbye to my host family was even harder than expected. No one said a word the entire car ride to the train station, because we all knew that we couldn't put into words how great the last two weeks had been. My host mother began to cry as we got to the train station and as I hugged her she whispered in my ear "Arigato, Sam." As our train arrived a must have hugged each member of my family five times each. We never said goodbye to each other. Instead, "see you again" was spoken. I promised them that if I was ever back in Japan for any reason at all I would visit. I will always keep this promise. I would be lying if I said that a few mainly tears were not shed that day by both my host father and me. The tremendous impact that the Minato family had on me will never be forgotten.

Being in Tokyo was also a great part of this journey. We were able to observe so much in our time there. The tour of the city allowed us to see much of the city in the little time that we had. From Shibuya to Harajuku and Akihabara the trip, although fun, was growing to be exhausting. We were all growing a little bit tired of always being tired. Nonetheless, seeing Skytree was an awesome sight, even on a foggy day. My time in Tokyo was well spent. Going to Tokyo Disney was a good way to wrap up the trip. Meeting Ryoko and having one last hurrah with all of my new friends that I had been traveling with for such a long time was the perfect way to end a fantastic two and a half weeks.

I would like to thank Fort Wayne Sister Cities and the Chapman Fund for making such a memorable trip possible. I will never be able to forget all of the memories from the amazing time that I had in Japan.