

**Ms. McKenna Asakawa's Impressions of Japan in the “Invitation Program for Japanese-American Students”( 3/3/2012-20/3/2012.)**

My experience in Japan with the 2012 Invitation Program for Japanese American Students, sponsored by the Japanese Foreign Ministry, was incredibly meaningful. Returning to Japan as a young woman allowed me to synthesize my previous knowledge of the island nation and to develop a more well-rounded understanding of the Japanese society, people, culture, and present. In my opinion, the highlight of the trip was the homestay, in which I stayed for two nights with the Suzuki family in Chiba. It was an extremely humbling and rewarding experience as the Suzukis were incredibly generous, thoughtful, and helped me to feel at home in a house so far away from my own in Lafayette, Colorado. It was also amazing to make such good friends within a day and a half. Staying with the three female Suzuki members, Mayuko (16), her sister Risako (20), and Ryoko-san, was refreshing and empowering as they are enthusiastic, bright, intelligent, hard-working, and effervescent women and showed me a perspective of Japanese society I had not yet been privy to. The Suzuki women showed me that Japanese can be down-to-earth, insightful, critical, worldly, fun, and eccentric, that many Japanese women are employed and work incredibly hard, and that Japanese teens stay up late at night and sleep late in the morning, just like every American teen I’ve ever met. I felt completely at home and at ease with the Suzuki family, and loved learning about Mayuko’s life, the family’s travels throughout Japan (and in the U.S.A), their daily habits, Risako’s plans to live in France, and Ryoko-san’s job at the hospital and adoration of the band “Il Divo.” It was also great to speak with Mr. Suzuki via cell-phone one evening, as I was unable to meet him since he was working in Hokkaido. It is my aspiration to continue to stay in touch with the Suzukis and I would love to have the opportunity to show them my hometown someday.

I also greatly enjoyed visiting historical/cultural sites, such as Kiyomizudera in Kyoto and Asakusa in Tokyo. As I’ve been taking a Japanese history course in school this year, the opportunity to visit such momentous locations in Japanese history was extremely valuable. I loved examining the architecture and the site’s significance, and imagining the time when the temple or castle was at its prime, its paintings in perfect condition, its halls filled with monks or attendants to the Shogun.

Meeting the students of Yokosuka High School and the members of my host family reiterated my understanding of the ultimate similarities of all humans. While it was undeniable that there were linguistic and cultural differences between us, I found that we shared a closer affinity than initially perceived. Yes, the high school students in Japan wear uniforms, eat ramen for lunch, and speak Nihongo, but they also goof-off in class, love to eat sweets, over-use Facebook, and chat, laugh, and smile just as much as American teenagers. In a class I attended, the first question that I was asked by the girls was not about American politics or the economy, our history, or English language, but “so, what kind of boys do you like?” Clearly, a teenage girl is a teenage girl, whether she lives in Colorado or Yokosuka. In my homestay family, looking at

their photo albums of road trips they had taken to southern Japan when Mayuko and Risako were little girls reminded me of all the road trips my family has taken to visit other states in the U.S. Eating at their dinner table, sleeping in their home, petting their dog, visiting their family ohaka, and having fun, laughing, and being silly during karaoke sessions with the girls reminded me of my home, my family, my cats, and my friends. Ultimately, I was consistently reminded how infallibly human we all are, and how we, as human beings, long to love, to laugh, to live, and to explore regardless of where live and where we're from. Japanese, American, French, Nicaraguan, or Ugandan, we are fundamentally human. We have families and pets, and hopes and dreams, favorite foods and favorite colors, we laugh, we cry, we live, we die. We are all so much more similar than we can possibly imagine.

I plan to use my experiences from this program in several ways. For one, I will present information I gathered from my trip to both my Spanish and East Asian History classes in order to help my fellow students gain a better understanding of Japanese culture and history. I also plan to write an article on my experience in Japan for the Wheel of Dharma newspaper for the American branch of the JodoShinshu Buddhist churches. Furthermore, I plan to keep in contact with people I met in Japan, including students from Yokosuka High School, my homestay family, and other members of the families that my peers stayed with. I already am planning to show the niece of the homestay mother of one of my travel mates my hometown and other regions of Colorado this fall, when she comes to visit. Additionally, I am inspired to consider studying Japanese history in college, as I will attend university this fall. Also, after watching a documentary on the hula girls of Fukushima on the plane ride back to the states, I was inspired to reach out to the hula girls impacted by the triple-disaster on 3-11 of last year. As I too dance Hawaiian hula, I hope to have my hula school write letters and possibly send a care package to the hula girls of the Spa Resort Hawaiians in Iwaki, as these girls were all impacted by the terrible tragedy that hit Japan last year. Above all, my further understanding of the affinity of all humankind has inspired me to pursue humanitarian work as I hope to bond with individuals from various cultures and communities worldwide in an effort to strengthen local economies and infrastructure.

I am extremely grateful to the Japanese Foreign Ministry, International Friendship Association, the friends I met in Japan, and our wonderful tour guides and coordinators for all of their hard work in giving me this amazing opportunity. I'd like to especially thank the Denver Consulate General of Japan for their careful consideration, thoroughness, and generosity in the selection process for this trip. I am humbled by all the kindness, hospitality, and selflessness I witnessed in my dealings with the Denver Consulate General's office and all the people I met and came in contact with while in Japan. Domo Arigato Gozaimashita.