

Kaila Nakamura 2019 High School Essay Contest Winner Reflection

On the Sunday of February 3rd, 2019 at 8:00 PM, I lay in bed scrolling through social media. I'm not sure how it came to mind, but suddenly I remembered that my Japanese teacher had advertised a logo and essay contest in class. The prize, being a free trip to study abroad in Japan, and my love for the arts pushed me to jump out of bed and into my desk to start working on my contest entry. My Japanese teacher had shared the contest information long before the deadline, but I told myself I wouldn't enter, because I felt as though I lacked the skill and creativity. Nonetheless, on the day before the deadline, I decided *why not?*

I had four hours until February 4th, so I was struggling to come up with an idea for my logo. It took me almost an hour to figure out the basic concept for the logo; my design and essay took quite a lot of research beforehand, including looking up the meaning and significance behind certain plants in Japan. Because this logo was meant to represent the cultural and educational exchange between Japan and America, I wanted to put the most meaning into my logo, rather than simply illustrate something eye-catching. So, after hours of designing and writing, I finally submitted my logo and essay.

A little over a month later, and a few days after my birthday, my mother told me I had missed a call from Angie Gaspar of KCC-JEE. Excited yet nervous, I decided to call her back; however, as doubtful as I typically am, I told myself that no matter what news I received, I had tried my best. That morning on the phone with Angie Gaspar was by far one of the happiest moments of my entire life--I had won.

Thus, on July 7th, I departed from the San Francisco airport, embarking on a trip that would leave a deep imprint on my heart forever.

When I first arrived in Japan, I was scared--utterly lost and anxious. I had never gone through an airport by myself, and trying to find my way through the airport proved difficult, as I was too afraid to ask anyone for help. Eventually, I made it through customs in time to catch my designated shuttle to Kyoto, where I would soon be living and studying for a month.

That first shuttle ride (and later taxi ride) in Japan left me in awe. I got to see the tall bamboo groves I had only ever seen on TV, the beautiful countryside, and endless mountains of a luscious green I had never once witnessed in California. Entering Kyoto, it was a cloudy afternoon; the streets were dark with the stain of rain, and the sidewalks were lined with transparent umbrellas bobbing alongside each other. The signs of convenience stores such as Lawson and Family Mart all shone so brightly against the continually darkening gray sky. Most people tend to complain about how gloomy rainy days can be, but I loved it; it was peaceful and beautiful.

At first, it was hard to adjust to living with a host family. I ate dinner with these strangers, used their bathroom, and slept in their house. But it didn't take me long to get used to it; after all, my host family was most welcoming and treated me as their own family.

My host mother was sweet and patient. She cooked the most splendid meals every day, and at dinner she would spend time asking me questions to encourage me to practice my Japanese until, eventually, I became comfortable starting conversations by myself.

On the other hand, I also had two absolutely adorable host siblings. They were the most *genki* 3 and 5 year old kids I had ever met. Everyday, they treated me like a real sister, referring to me as *Kaira onee-chan*, and constantly asking me to play with them. I was especially fond of my little host brother. Every afternoon when I returned from school, as I opened the front door to

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the house, I always heard him call my name as he ran down the stairs to greet me. He was also generally the messenger of the house, so when it was dinner time or time for me to shower, he would come into my room with the cutest smile upon his face and deliver the message (as best he could when he actually remembered what he was supposed to tell me).

Without my wonderful host family, I would not have been able to experience the Japanese home-life I had always admired.

There are a few things I will never forget from my time in Japan. For a while, I braved the forty-five minute bike ride from my house to the Kyoto Japanese School; I say “braved” because each ride left me drenched in sweat, not only from the humid weather itself, but also the sweat from exertion. In addition, all bikes in Japan had built in locks with a corresponding key. It was weird, to me, seeing all these bikes lined up in front of a Family Mart not chained up, frame and wheel, to a bike rack like in America. The amount of trust left me incredulous.

After school was the time for me to explore. With school ending at 12:30 PM everyday, I would either walk 2 minutes to Seven Eleven and purchase an onigiri, or I would venture on long walks to new restaurants I hadn't tried. There were a few places I had frequented in my time in Kyoto: Kyoto Gyoen, Teramachi and Kawaramachi Street, and Ichiran Ramen. Kyoto Gyoen (the imperial garden) was always my favorite place to study or relax when it was too hot to do anything, while Teramachi and Kawaramachi street were my go-to shopping areas, as there was always something new for me to discover there.

Finally, after exploring, I would walk an hour and a half home, or take the subway nearest to wherever I had ventured out to. The full Japanese experience is not complete without getting lost in the subway, standing over people in a crowded bus or train, or using a transportation card like ICOCA. It took me quite a while to get used to the public transportation system, and the beeps as cards were swiped at the gates of the subways still ring clearly in my ears.

Even though I was only awarded with a trip to Kyoto, I was able to visit two other major cities in Japan. First, I went to Osaka and met up with a Japanese friend I had met on a language learning app. Since I didn't really have many friends at school (as most of my classmates were working adults), it was really exciting to be able to practice Japanese with a native and finally hangout with someone. Additionally, I got to spend two days in Tokyo with one of my high school friends and another online Japanese friend. I think that my trip would not have been complete without having visited these cities, because they all represent different aspects of Japan.

Thanks to this study abroad opportunity, my Japanese significantly improved, I became more familiar with Japan's culture, and I got to experience my first real independence from home in the country I admire most. Furthermore, I was able to meet people from a variety of countries such as Taiwan, France, and the Philippines (to name a few). This trip was particularly special to me because even though I am half Japanese, I have never been able to visit Japan, as the cost of an entire trip is something I could never afford. Thus, I am honored to have been selected by KCC-JEE to study abroad in Kyoto, Japan.