

KCCJEE Essay

Meeting my Navajo family my freshman summer was initially....awkward. The oldest generation couldn't speak English, they had a wary and suspicious attitude towards foreigners (stemming from a history of violence and abuse), and their entire culture was so different from mine. When I approached one little girl, she hid behind her mother's skirt, eyes trained on the ground. That first afternoon was a social disaster, and when we dejectedly left, we despaired of ever crossing the impossibly wide barrier.

For three summers now, I've visited a Navajo reservation in Sweetwaters, Arizona, to serve the families there while simultaneously building relationships. Mornings were spent doing work projects requested by the Navajo community--in my case, painting houses and digging up weeds--and evenings were spent in outreach with our Navajo families.

Despite their initial cold and even sullen response, I yearned to bridge the distance with my Navajo family, so in the following days I engaged however they felt comfortable--Kasen clinging to me piggyback-style over the barren desert path, Chandra knotting my yucca-root-washed hair into the traditional tsiiyéél hairbun, and Zamora teaching me ahth-ah-ah, nah-kih, tah, dee, ahshlah--the numbers one to five in the WWII codetalker's Navajo language. Eventually, after three challenging summer trips, even the adults reciprocated with warmth and trust--I pondered God's existence with Mark and sympathized with Genevieve's heartache in leaving the reservation alone to provide for her children. After painting reservation homes under the hot sun by day, I delighted in laughter-filled evenings with my Navajo family. I loved exploring the differences in our mindsets, our customs, our daily lives, treasuring the friendships that slowly emerged as the walls of their hearts disintegrated to dust like the sandstorms sweeping across the desert horizon.

Those three summers, I learned that my personality is one that both embraces and thrives in unfamiliar situations. Taking the initiative to interact with others in ways that were familiar to them but unfamiliar to me--throwing myself into Navajo culture and activities--helped me focus on forming strong bonds and soaking in the entire experience.

These same principles--adapting to the local culture, expanding my horizons and comfort zone, and wholeheartedly investing in the people there--would help me thrive in Japan, which is even more unfamiliar to me than the Navajo Nation. Although I am half-Japanese-American, I am fourth-generation *yonsei*, so Japan and its culture are as foreign to me as any other. Yet, my Japanese language studies in high school sparked a love for the country of my heritage, and I yearn to experience its rich landscape, culture, language, and people firsthand. I would be thrilled to bond with my host family as a new daughter--not just a tourist--sharing my own background and perspective and learning theirs. The lessons I learned from my time with the Navajo set the foundation for me to grow enormously on an academic, personal, and relational level should I receive the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study and live in Japan, the country I'm growing to love more and more.