

I am only 17 years old and feel like I won the lottery. During my stay in Kyoto, I met new people, tried new foods, and explored new places. In just four weeks I've gotten to know a city so well that it will never leave my mind.

During the days leading up to the trip, I was frantic trying to get myself together and prepare myself for the long journey. The thing I was most nervous about was meeting my host family and living in their house for four weeks. It took me a few days to adjust to the new environment, but my host mother was welcoming and made me feel right at home. We bonded over our love of traveling, food, and music. There was also a Russian student living with us, and he and I enjoyed seeing our host mother's childhood home in Takamatsu together. There, we met her sister and friends who we got to explore the city with.

Another weekend, Josephine's host family invited Payten and me to a barbecue in Fukuchiyama. We ate delicious meat and seafood at the house and later cooled off by the river. Experiences like these were ones you could only get from living with a host family. I felt so welcomed by everyone during my trip that it was like I had been living there my whole life.

School also felt natural and was a great experience for meeting new people and learning more Japanese. I enjoyed having different teachers every day who each had a unique style of teaching, which made learning more exciting. In my class, I became friends with students from Spain, Germany, China, and the Philippines. I also met people from other countries who were in different classes at the school. Outside of class, we mostly spoke English to each other but simultaneously used Japanese words and phrases during our conversations. This helped me to memorize and learn more easily and feel comfortable speaking the language more often.

Every day was a new adventure. After school, Payten, Josephine, and I ate lunch at a new spot and then explored a new part of the city. I could not imagine the trip without them. Most of the friends I made at the school had to attend afternoon classes, so it wasn't easy to hang out with them outside of school. Something that the KCC-JEE could think about is having at least two winners each year or every other year. My experience would have been completely different without them.

One thing we came to love during our trip was the public transportation. Payten, Josephine, and I easily hopped on a train multiple times to visit Osaka, Nara, and Uji. We got to see so much more than just Kyoto which made the experience even more special. Our favorite activity was going to baseball games. We will forever root for our team, the Orix Buffaloes! It was fascinating to see what baseball was like in Japan since it is just as popular as in the United States. I will hold onto my Hiroya Miyagi #13 jersey for the rest of my life.

This September, I am going into my last year of high school and will begin the process of applying to colleges. For months, I have been struggling to figure out what major I want to apply for and eventually what I would like to do with the rest of my life. From my experiences in Japan, I have come to realize that whatever I decide to do with my life, I know that I want it to involve traveling and working with other people around the world. Since returning home from the trip, I have been looking more into majors such as international relations and global studies. I've had this type of major on my mind for a while now, but the connections I made in Japan have influenced me to look more closely into them. I am now confident to say that I want to pursue something that connects me with different people and places, whatever that may look like in the future.

After years of conflict and war throughout the 20th century, it's amazing how an American, a Russian, and a Japanese person can live together and enjoy each other's stories and experiences. I would love to play a role in continuing to bring people together in that way. I admire the KCC-JEE for being a connection between the US and Japan and giving young people the opportunity to be a part of that. Thank you.