

Kizuna Project: My Experience in Japan



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The Kizuna Project is a fully funded two-week program sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From July 8th to July 21st, twenty students from Northside College Preparatory High School (NCP) visited various areas of Japan, including Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, and the prefecture of Ibaraki. The purpose of this trip was to raise students' awareness about the conditions in Japan after the earthquake and tsunami of March 11th, 2011. We were able to see and feel firsthand the Japanese culture through sleeping in traditional inns, visiting museums and shrines, doing volunteer work, staying with host families, and attending high school classes.

Being Japanese-American, my parents and I were very excited when we found out I was accepted into the Kizuna Project. I thought that this would be a great opportunity to see for myself how different Japan is from the United States, both culturally and socially. The last time I went to Japan was when I was only five years old: I was not mature enough to appreciate the value of visiting such a wonderful country. Thankfully, I am much older now. Japanese citizens are some of the most polite people you will ever meet and the scenery is astonishing.

One of the first things my classmates and I noticed about Japan was its stunning landscape. It felt like everywhere you looked, you would see an appealing shade of green or an incredibly engineered building. We settled down at the Washington Hotel in Shinjuku on our first night in Tokyo. As you can probably gather from its name, this hotel was very westernized and served an American-style breakfast on the twenty-fifth floor, giving us a great view of the city while we ate. But on the first night, my roommate and I did not get much sleep because we were still awe-struck at the fact that we were halfway across the world, moreover, in a great country like Japan.

For the following three days and nights, the Omoide Romankan in Ibaraki prefecture accommodated NCP, along with three other American high schools partaking in the Kizuna Project. Ibaraki was one of the harder hit prefectures so this was where we did most of our assignments. However, if you were to go to this area of Japan right now, you would hardly be able to tell this region was struck with natural disasters. Being in the countryside, we saw more of Mother Nature's beauty than ever



before. Omoide Romankan was magnificent and remains my personal favorite because it was a traditional Japanese inn with tatami rooms and an onsen (hot spring), a wholly new experience for me.

While in Ibaraki, we sat through a lot of lectures and they were rather interesting and informative. We relived the tragedy on March 11th, 2011 through images and videos we had not seen before. We also learned about the current physical, emotional, and economical state of areas in Ibaraki such as Daigo-machi and Hitachi city. For example, since last year, 96% of the electricity in Tohoku, 99% of the phone lines and railways, 98% of the water, and 100% of the national roads and airports



have recovered. Despite this, tourism has dropped significantly due to lingering radiation rumors, leading to a deficiency of people at previously popular tourist sites. It was disappointing and quite melancholic to observe this prolonged effect of the Fukushima Daiichi power plant's meltdown. One such case was the gorgeous and unique Fukuroda Waterfalls, which changes with the season, and was basically abandoned save the workers. However, that did not stop us from having a wonderful time there.

Along with going to one of the three major waterfalls of Japan, we had the pleasure of stopping at an oyaki-making school in Daigo-machi. Here, we made delicious pumpkin and apple oyaki, a kind of stuffed pastry. The next day, we arrived at Kwarago Beach in Hitachi city just in time for the preparation of the annual Sand Art Festival. There were fascinating works of



handmade art everywhere and we had the chance to do our part by making our own sand sculptures. While both of these events were a blast and did not feel like volunteer work, both of these towns were severely lacking in tourists and local people. The oyaki-making and sand sculpting was our way of volunteering by promoting tourism in the areas that needed it most. Through it all, the people we met remained optimistic, cheerful, and thankful that we were able to make it to Ibaraki.

On July 13th, we began our Tokyo study tour and went back to the Washington Hotel in Shinjuku for three days and nights. During this span, we visited several museums dedicated to natural disasters and Japanese history. I felt that the most important part of this portion of the trip was being in an earthquake simulator. As you readers know, Chicago does not get a lot of earthquakes or any other natural disasters, for that matter. There have maybe been two or three 'real' earthquakes here in the past couple of years but I definitely slept through them all! So experiencing first-hand what the people of Japan felt last year was a rather eye-opening experience for me. It made me grateful to live in a relatively disaster-free city like Chicago.

After our tour in Tokyo, we stayed at the homes of our respective host families for two nights and days. Shortly before we finally met them, everybody from NCP was extremely nervous and worried that they would not get along with their host family. Looking back on this moment, our fears were utterly ridiculous, as each host family treated their hosted student like royalty. On both days, NCP students went to Keio Shonan Fujisawa High School with their host sibling. Being in a Japanese classroom setting didn't really feel any different from being in an American classroom: the students all chatted at their friends' desks and were a little rowdy, at least until the teacher came in. After school, we made memories with our host families. I was very lucky because all the members of my host family were nearly fluent in English and their customs were very 'Americanized', making me feel at home. With my loving host family, I went to a summer festival, ate shabu-shabu for the first time (it was so tasty!), played videogames, and lit fireworks. The only drawback of this segment of our trip was that it was way too abridged. I did not get to spend nearly as much time as I wanted to with my host family, but it was by far the most enjoyable two days of my summer.

Following the home stay, we traveled to Kyoto and Osaka for the last three days and nights of our trip. In that time, we visited many different famous sites including the Kyoto International Manga Museum, Kinkakuji, Nijo and Osaka Castle, and the Shijo Kawaramachi area. A lot of shopping was done on the Kyoto study tour and at this point, most of the students including myself did not want to return back to the United States. A small group of eight students and myself decided to spend our last night in Japan doing something that seems to be a Japanese tradition – karaoke! Because of our curfew we were only able to sing for thirty minutes, but it was the most amusing thirty minutes of my life.



I felt a sense of warmth from the Japanese people and the country from the moment I touched down in Narita Airport; everyone was so respectful and all the areas we visited were so breathtaking. It was shocking to see that false rumors of radiation have scared tourists away from astonishing sites like the Fukuroda Waterfalls and Kawarago Beach. If any of you have the time and money to help with the recovery efforts, please do so! Japan has remained a friendly, environmentally conscious, and beautiful nation despite their troubles. This trip has opened my eyes and taught me to be appreciative of the little things in life. As I returned home from O'Hare Airport, I looked out the car window the whole time in gratitude. Although nature in Chicago is not as pure as it is in Japan, I feel very lucky to live in such a great city. I would like to thank the Japanese government and my Japanese teacher, Ms. Jeung-Hee Park, for providing this excellent opportunity. I'd go back to Japan in a heartbeat!