

Gabrielle Oliver

Tanaka Green Scholarship Reflection

My five months in Japan afforded me with some of the greatest, most life-changing experiences I have ever encountered in my short 21 years of living. Aside from being able to have the opportunity to learn at such an amazing, enriching international school such as Kansai Gaidai University in Osaka Prefecture, I was also able to participate in an outstanding homestay program, make countless friends from all over the world, and visit a number of historic and cultural sites during my time in Japan.

When I first arrived, I was worried about how challenging my Japanese courses would be – and I was definitely right to be anxious, as my courses were extremely fast-paced and quite challenging. Nonetheless, my Japanese and Kanji professors were some of the kindest teachers, let alone people, I had ever met; and I would not have been as nearly as motivated to learn and work hard if it was not for their support and care. My professors at Kansai Gaidai made a point to connect to me and my fellow classmates by making jokes, talking to us and hosting fun events outside of class, and by simply putting on a smile every day they walked into the classroom. Even when my professors were sick, they still worked so hard every day; and seeing their dedication really inspired me to do my very best at all times.

Though I learned so much Japanese in my classes – especially (hundreds of) kanji – I cannot deny the fact that I definitely learned and acquired the most Japanese by living with a Japanese family right in the middle of Osaka city. My host family spoke no English, and unlike a number of my friends who had short, 10 to 20-minute commutes to university, my commute by train was 45 to 55 minutes every day. The closest family I had lived all the way down in Hiroshima, and all of these factors combined really made step outside of my comfort-zone. At first, I was really worried about how I would be able to communicate with a host mom who spoke at the speed of light and a host dad who spoke in heavy Kansai-ben, but after a week or two, I could already feel my brain beginning to adapt and I surprised

myself by how quickly I was picking up new vocabulary and grammar. After a few weeks, I had realized that deciding to live with a Japanese family that spoke no English was one of the best decisions I had ever made because I was forced to speak and practice Japanese early in the morning (sometimes when I was not fully awake) and late at night when I was exhausted from school and the long commute home in a packed train. Not only was this great practice for me, but it allowed me to build relationships with my host family by us constantly exchanging our cultures and languages. Though I was at a very intermediate level – level 4 out of 7 by Kansai Gaidai University’s Japanese language assessment – my host family and I somehow were able to have conversations about anything from the weather, all the way to politics in both of our respective countries. It was experiences like these that convinced me that I really did have the skills to be proficient in Japanese – I just had to put my mind to it.

My time in Japan was and is so valuable to me and my future because my development of Japanese language skills, and better understanding of Japanese history and culture, will allow me to properly assist and reach my future students as I plan to teach English in Japan in the coming years. The relationship between the US and Japan is very near and dear to my heart, because I have seen the power of friendships, international connections, and foreign relations during my time at Kansai Gaidai. Because of my experience in the Asian Studies Program, I know that I will always be devoted to facilitating and nurturing the relationship between the US and Japan.