



JAPAN FOUNDATION

## Land of the Rising Sun

The Jet Memorial Invitation Program was a blessing for me and all 31 other high school students from across the nation who were invited to participate. Since I was little, I had always dreamed of coming to Japan but with financial difficulty in the family, the dream did not seem attainable. Thankfully through this program, not only was I able to step foot in Japan, but was guided through intense cultural and language study.

On our first day out, we went to Senboku High School and were able to observe and participate in the life of the Japanese students. Along with attending their classes and having lunch together, we even went out on the town after school where they were able to show us their favorite shops and places to eat. Alongside learning about the more modern Japan, we also immersed ourselves in the classical and traditional aspects of the country. We visited Osaka Castle and went to Kiyomizu and Kinkakuji Temple in Kyoto. It was incredible to see how old tradition and values do not die out in Japan though they are surrounded by a competitive technological world. Geishas, charms, pagodas, temple prayer, supernatural beliefs and much more still survive.

Staying in the Kansai Center in Osaka, we had free time to venture the town and unite ourselves with the city and the people on a more personal level (yet since we had not fully mastered the language, it was filled with a lot of awkward conversation and hand gestures trying to describe a piñata). Before parents dragged them away, we caught many children and sometimes adults staring at us, the foreigners.

Above all these wonderful things I experienced, I must say that my favorite was the homestay. Entering their household my knowledge of Japan was immediately put to the test as I had to properly excuse my entrance and remove my shoes. Knowing that my family's English capability was ranked "D" did not help much in putting my mind at ease. Yet, I spoke too soon. The hospitality and attentiveness my family showed to a guest was beyond any I had ever experienced. They asked me what my favorite Japanese food was and before I knew it, we were eating it homemade for lunch! I could have glanced at something longingly for less than a second and a second later I would be insisting that they did not have to buy it for me. My host parents and sister treated me like part of the family rather than with detached reservation toward a stranger. Although it was only for two days, the bond I established with that family will never fade. My sweet host-mother, my dancing and lively host-sister, and even my humorous host-dad (who was obsessed with the fact that I came from Dallas, the place President Kennedy was shot) will never leave my heart.

Personally, this was life changing. All my five senses experienced Japan. I tasted homemade takoyaki, I saw the pagodas and shrines, I smelt the salty waters of Osaka bay, I heard the cheerful banter of elders telling wonderful stories, and I felt a tingling sensation go through my arms and reach my heart as I struck Taiko drums. The way I view things has changed and a passion within me to become an ambassador between Japan and the United States has grown. This amazing trip that the JET Memorial Invitation Program sent me on will not be put to waste. I Marlene Campos will become a bridge between two great nations.