

Hawaii Okinawa Student Exchange Reflections – by Rhiannon Palmere

I have always been fascinated with the different cultures and traditions of the world. This Hawaii United Okinawa Association student exchange program was a great opportunity to learn and experience a life foreign to my own. Taking in a student from Okinawa showed me how different they found our daily life from their typical day. Even better, being able to travel up to Okinawa taught me so much about the similarities and differences between the two environments and cultures.

When we arrived at Narita Airport, I was excited to be in a different country for the first time. It was so heart-warming seeing the Okinawa students meet and surprise us at the airport. This was the first sign that I was going to have a good time; because my host family was so kind as to drive 45 minutes just to welcome me. However the next day, it hit me that I would be separated from the Hawaii members and will have no one to speak English with. On the ride home from the Prefectural Office, I was extremely nervous. Things like, “What if I don’t have a good time?” or “I have only studied the Japanese language for one year, I am so lost.” popped into my mind. This was a scary feeling, being alone in a different country because you do not understand anything. Throughout my stay, my worries disappeared and I found myself dreading leaving Okinawa and having to come back to Hawaii. I became part of the family and was treated as if I actually attended Kyuyo High School. The things that my host student, her family, and her friends taught me, are things I will never forget.

The places we visited, as a group and with just my host, were interesting and some educational. I had not given much thought to the relationship between the US and Japan, before this trip. Learning about the Battle of Okinawa and going to the memorials were eye-opening. The Himeyuri Peace Museum moved me and had me teary-eyed the whole time. On the other hand, places like Okinawa World, the Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum, and Churaumi Aquarium were very fun and a nice way to strengthen the bond between us, Hawaii students. On the bus rides to and from our “field trips,” I found that Okinawa and Oahu are very similar in landscape and scenery - both have their fair share of city, suburb, and rural areas. During our stay in Okinawa, I got to experience the heat and humidity first-hand. The temperature, or lack of air condition, was the only factor that made me grouchy.

This was such an amazing opportunity and I am grateful for the memories, experiences, and lessons I got from it. Through this exchange program, I made unforgettable relationships and truly felt the spirit of the Okinawan saying: “Once we have met, we are like brothers and sisters.” It’s funny thinking back to when I was scared to be in Okinawa and felt “alone,” because the only thing that I want to do now is go back.