

Reflection on the Hawaii-Okinawa Exchange Program

I was sixteen years old and spoke very little Japanese. I probably wouldn't have gone, except my mom (the late Lorraine Kaneshiro), said she thought it would be a good opportunity for me to experience Okinawa in a way that I wouldn't get to if I just went on a tour. And, as usual, she was right. It was my first time abroad and my first taste of Okinawa. I can't say that I remember every detail of that trip. I DO remember being well cared for by my host family. I went to Konan Senior High School with my host student, Tazuko, and when I put on the school uniform, no one could tell that I was from Hawaii (as long as I didn't speak). I remember Tazuko's fun group of friends who all came to the airport to see me off when I left. I remember being instantly connected to relatives whom I had never met, despite the language difficulties. I remember leaving Okinawa hoping I would return...hoping that first trip was just the beginning of many Okinawa adventures to come.

Never in my wildest dreams, however, did I think I would still be involved with this wonderful program. I don't think anyone could have predicted its success, and more than twenty years later, we are still giving students this same opportunity that I had...and it is STILL amazing! Students are lucky these days; social media makes it much easier to keep in touch with their hosts and friends than when I went on the program in 1992. There are many stories of former participants who have gone back to Okinawa to study, work, and live. After living and working in Okinawa as an ALT (assistant language teacher) in the JET (Japanese Exchange Teaching) program, I returned home and was hoping to get involved with the student exchange program in some way. Being able to help when the Okinawa students are in Hawaii and chaperoning the student groups to Okinawa, allows me a chance, in whatever small way, to support and contribute to the Hawaii-Okinawa Student Exchange Program. I cannot express how deeply satisfying it is to watch our students from Hawaii experiencing Okinawa in this unique way; making new friends, learning about the battle of Okinawa, promoting peace, practicing their Japanese...I feel like things have come full circle for me. Special thanks to my husband, Keith, and my dad, Art Kaneshiro, for supporting me and my young family so that I can be involved with the association in this way. I think my mom would be pleased.

My Japanese is much better now and returning to Okinawa is like returning home. I know that "icharibachooode" (once we meet, we are brothers/sisters) is not just a saying; it is truly the heart and spirit of the Okinawan people. I know this *because* of this program...*because* of the friendships we have made with the people who have been involved over the many years...and *because* of the students and host families, in both Okinawa and Hawaii, who perpetuate "icharibachooode" year after year.

I would like to acknowledge and extend my appreciation to the Hawaii United Okinawa Association for its vision and commitment to this life-changing experience. If you have an opportunity to support the student exchange program, please do so. If you have children or grandchildren who could benefit from participating in the program, we hope to see you hosting in February-March. Lastly, all of this would not be possible without the dedication and resolve of Ms. Jane Serikaku. Thank you, Jane. As we look forward to the 25th year of this program, I hope we will continue to provide opportunities for our young people to learn about Okinawa, its culture, and its people. Focusing on our teens and prioritizing programs like this one, is evidence that we take seriously our obligation to promote global understanding and to maintain our strong ties with Okinawa in the future. MY future...my children, are two and five years old. Can we do this for at least another 15 years? Yoroshiku onegaishimasu.

Stacy (Kaneshiro) Kawamura
Participant 1994, Chaperone 2014