

## Okinawa Foreign Exchange Program 2014 Essay

June 29th, 2014

My name is Chaslyn Gonzaga, and this was my second time on this Okinawa Foreign Exchange Program. I was a Sophomore when I first attended the program. However, up until then I had a great interest in my Japanese heritage. During my Sophomore year, I tried extremely hard to go abroad on a Foreign Exchange to Japan and I applied to several programs and was rejected by all. Then I heard about the Okinawa Foreign Exchange from my Japanese 1 teacher during class, however, most of the students in the class were unsure about the unknown exchange but I took the application my sensei offered and I applied to the exchange not knowing much about it.

I received an email from Mrs. Jane Serikaku obtaining a message of congratulations and information on the meetings and flight information and of other students that were also accepted into the program. I noticed that there were two other students from my school that was also attending the program but I never did know of them. When we attended the first meeting, I was unsure and nervous meeting new people, but going to Japan has always been a dream of mines and I attended the meeting head on and tried to not talk to much students. When we got there, I noticed that there were all kinds of students from all schools around the island, there were some students with two or more friends also attending the program and some seemed to have already known each other, and some remained quiet and sat on the side hoping that this trip will be a good one and I was one of them.

There weren't much meetings but we somehow learned two dances and prepared speeches and a song, while discussing about the trip and how it would be like. There was one girl coming with us to Okinawa as her second time, so she discussed her first experience with us and made us feel more comfortable going knowing that we have someone there that knew of the trip. Tom and Kawamura Sensei also made us feel reassured.

When we finally got together at the airport, everyone was still awkward even though we made slight friends that we got along with during the meetings, but we were all still very independent and awkward. However, the group we went up with in 2013 was smaller compared to this years foreign exchange group. Instead, we had ten girls and two boys coming up with us in 2013. We sat down at our gate with everyone and we played ice breakers and talked for hours on the plane with the people we sat by. Then everyone gathered in Nagoya Airport and explored together during our layover. During this time we bonded and had an even more fun flight flying over to Okinawa. When we got to Okinawa we all experienced together as first timers surprising things and learned about the Okinawan culture as one.

We were terrified when we got to the Onsen at the hotel the first night and had struggles taking showers with our newfound friends. It was a really funny experience, I have to tell you that. During the Onsen we felt like it was a little obstacle compared to the rest of the trip. We experienced surprising things one day after the other and every day in Okinawa seemed to get more interesting as the two weeks progressed. We made bonds with newfound friends and families that we made, so strong that they are still alive today. Going to Okinawa the first year made me learn much more about the culture of Japan but Okinawa as well, I was able to notice the differences and changes between our life in Hawaii and in Okinawa easily as well as I noticed the similarities.

Being in Okinawa felt as if I was still home, but at the same time it felt as I made a new one as well. Before going to Okinawa I always dreamed of going into fashion in the near future and

progress my education with fashion in New York, I dreamed really big and I was planning on aiming for that goal. However, at the same time I always had a great passion for culture in Asia and language, and I was planning to bring that same passion and knowledge up to New York with me and study there for college. But that all changed when I got back from those two weeks in Okinawa. I realized that my true passion was more towards language and culture instead of fashion, and when I realized this I also realized that having this passion will make my near future more fun. I now plan to major in Business and continue my studies in Japanese. I would like to have my future in Japan, and I plan to visit Okinawa much more often.

When I got back to Hawaii, I put these goals into action and I ended up hosting students from Okinawa later my Junior year in High School. Then I returned to Okinawa for the second time on the exchange with two students that went to Okinawa with me last year, and meet with my host student that came to Hawaii my Junior year and stayed with her for two weeks on the exchange. During this year I also meet with the friends and families that I once was with last year, and it seemed as if I never left. I hope that when I visit again in the near future, it will feel as if I never left.