

The summer of 2018 took me across the globe. I spent months before writing essays, filling out forms, and saving up money to be able to do a two month long exchange in Japan. When I learned of the 4-H exchange program through Labo, after spending two years studying Japanese language and culture, I couldn't turn down the opportunity. Then suddenly on the night before I was to fly out, I was terrified. The farthest I had been from my small Michigan town on my own before was Texas, and that was only for one week. On my last day of school, it felt like I was saying goodbye forever. It felt like a few minutes later and I was sitting by myself on a plane.

I read my culture and language notes again and again. I read the packet I was sent so many times I thought I could recite it by memory. Three days later, that managed to pass both too slowly and too quickly, I met my first host family. I found myself in a culture so contrary to my own that even basic hand signals were different. A motion I associated with "Go away" was now "Follow me". Instead of pointing at my chest to indicate myself, I was to point at my nose. I had only been on a train once in my life, and now I was expected to ride one every day into Tokyo on my own for language classes.

But as days went by I stopped thinking so much about the differences and started to realize how similar we all were, especially after spending a week attending a Japanese high school.

With my host sister, Chihiro, and a few other new friends, I was team manager for the boy's soccer team. We spent most of practice refilling water bottles and running them out onto the field. Unless someone was hurt, that was our main job and it left good amounts of free time. We would put this time to use getting to know each other, a difficult task when you have to translate every word before speaking it. There were quite a few moments when I could not understand the Japanese and they could not easily translate to English. In these moments, the girls would almost conference with each other to build a translation for me. After a long moment of rapid Japanese, a girl named Hidari turned to me and said, "Favorite face. Who is your

favorite face?” They told me the jersey numbers of their “favorite faces” as an example. Even now I can’t help but smile at the memory. There we were, five high school girls, clustered together to talk about cute boys.

It was one small interaction on a long trip that challenged my thinking, especially in the way I saw cultural differences. When we sat together doing homework, it didn’t matter that I shook hands growing up and they bowed. When we played soccer together, it didn’t matter that I had used forks my whole life while they used chopsticks. The little things I feared when I was leaving the states have become habits I refuse to give up now that I am home and the things that I miss most. I challenged myself to examine my entire worldview over those two months and I am so glad I did. Not only did I gain a new perspective on culture, but I gained friends and another family across the globe. I will never forget the wonderful memories I have made and will always be grateful for all the people that helped me along the way.

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2018 Michigan Delegate

Japan 8 week program