

The essays by Nagaokakyo Students on their visit to Arlington in 2010

(In Alphabetical order)

Originally written in Japanese and translated by Rieko Tanaka

Mayu Asai

While we are heading towards Arlington from the airport by bus, my heart was filled with mixed emotions, such as excitement, anticipation, and still anxiety. Though the adult chaperones and friends were with me, I still was anxious. Would my English be OK? Would I be able to get along with my host family? My mother always took care of my daily life – how do I do laundry? Gradually, anxiety dominated my mind.

However, once I met my host family, my anxiety faded quickly. The family was very friendly, especially Eva, who was one year older than me. We became good friends. If I was worried about anything, I could talk to her and she made me feel better by saying “no problem” with a smile on her face. We played cards together and I tried to teach her how to play “Shichi-narabe”, a Japanese card game. It was difficult to make myself understood, but I strung all the words I knew and finally managed it. We enjoyed the game together. Eventually I could form better sentences after a while.

There were a few differences in our lifestyles. I was taken aback a little at the beginning about wearing shoes in the house and only taking shower and not taking bath. I also noticed they are more relaxed about punctuality. In general, I felt that their lifestyle is more relaxed than Japanese, who tend to pursue perfection in every detail of life.

When we departed Japan, someone said, “You will grow up a lot through this trip.” I don’t know exactly how I changed or grew up, but yes, something has changed in me. A part of it is that I learned to feel gratitude to everyone who supported this program and gave us this precious opportunity.

Takuma Fukuda

I learned many things during this visit. One thing is that you can communicate over the barrier of language and culture if you have will. Before the visit, I had been worried that I would have communication trouble with my host family. But once I arrived, my host family welcomed me with such kindness and warmth, my anxiety melted down and turned into trust and comfort with them.

My host family’s son had a best friend and he stayed with us, too. They both liked to joke around a lot and they were always joking and laughing. I didn’t understand all their jokes, but I tried hard to connect their words together and gestures. When I got used to that process and understood their jokes, it felt great to share their laughter.

There was one thing I couldn’t change in US. In Japan, we say “Itadaki-masu” before every meal and “Gochiso-sama-deshita” after. (See Rieko’s note below) I could not start eating without saying it. I knew host family wouldn’t understand what I was doing, but I couldn’t help saying them. This was something I kept my custom no matter what.

There were many things I liked about US. Their friendliness to the people they met for the first time, and their ability to speak their mind clearly. Both countries and cultures have good sides. I would like to be a bridge between the two countries and help people to understand each other better.

We participated in many activities, but I enjoyed the time I spent with my host family the most. Through them, I even made more friends. That is my most treasured memory. I think this visit was a huge success and I want to say thank you to many people who supported us and the program. Thank you very much.

(Rieko’s note: All Japanese say this before and after meals and sometimes snack as well – it shows our appreciation and gratitude for the food, for the person who prepared the meal for you, and all people who were involved in production of food on the table, and nature which provides food for us.)

Natsuki Izu

First, I would like to thank many people who helped us and supported this program from the bottom of my heart. Especially to my host family, who were very kind to me throughout my stay. Though I was very nervous since we started e-mailing each other until we finally met face to face, they welcomed me warmly and treated me as a member for the family. Everyday they asked me how the day was and how I feel. I could feel their concern and interest in me, and it was very encouraging.

There were many things that surprised me. Many things were much larger than those in Japan and food tasted very different. Host family's children were very interested in Japanese culture and we did origami, kendama, sang Japanese songs, and looked at Japanese map together. We don't appreciate these things much in Japan, so this was a lot of fun for me as well.

There were so many things I wanted to convey, things I wanted to know, things I wanted to try and feel. Every time I managed to make myself understood, it felt great. I learned that the most important thing is that your will to communicate and have something you really want to say. The rest will follow then!

We participated in many events. The most memorable one was the Cherry Blossom Festival. When the friendship cherry tree was planted, I hoped very strongly that the friendship between Nagaokakyo and Arlington will last many years and develop even more.

Through this visit, I met many students in Arlington from the elementary school to high school. They are all my fond memories that I will cherish forever. I look forward to visit Arlington again in the future. Thank you very much!

Nanami Kikuzuma

Throughout our weekly study session prior to the visit, I felt more pressure than excitement. I saw the younger junior high students studying much harder than us high school students. I felt that I should try as hard as I could to study. Once I was determined, I had much better results at the sessions.

Upon arrival, I couldn't understand what people in Arlington were saying at all. That was a harsh reality for me. I was frustrated that I couldn't understand what they were saying. Then I found out that all my friends were feeling the same way and I wasn't alone. I renewed my resolve and made a lot of effort to talk while looking into the other's eyes. And I learned that we can still communicate not just by language but also with our feelings. I started enjoying conversation with my host family and friends. Language was one of the tools for the communication, but not entirely itself.

Now looking back, I think this program made me stronger. I had a lot of fun and challenges and I tasted the reward of perseverance. I think I grew up tremendously though I still have so much to learn. I want to continue learning English, American culture, and its history. And I want to visit Arlington again. I was so fortunate to participate in this program and cherish the memory of my fellow Nagaokakyo students who visited Arlington with me. I also would like to thank chaperone teachers and other teachers who taught us at study sessions. Thank you very much!

Airi Kuriyama

My most memorable experience in Arlington was Cherry Blossom Festival. This festival was held in Arlington for the first time this year. We danced Naruko and then, danced Nagaokakyo-Ondo with the people of Arlington. It was a lot of fun. Next, the junior high students taught people Japanese culture – origami, kendama, and calligraphy. We high school students served traditional Japanese tea ceremony in kimono. I was a host of the tea ceremony, which is a very important role. I was nervous, but the local tea ceremony master helped us and I managed to calm down. The ceremony went smoothly. I was very glad that many people were interested and tasted the tea we served. Many people told us they liked tea and gave us many compliments. My host family was happy, too. It was a precious experience to conduct a tea ceremony in USA and I am so happy that we took part in Cherry Blossom Festival.

Kazusa Madoba

The visit to Arlington was filled with wonderful experiences and memories. The best day was Host Family Day. My host family took me to the Concord River for canoeing. The place was beautiful and I saw many wild birds. Robert and I canoed together and I really enjoyed talking with him. Host mother took me to the shopping mall, too. We had great time shopping some clothes together. Host father was very kind and sweet man. When I got up at 6am every morning, he was waiting for me, cooking wonderful breakfast. I was surprised to see that he also cooked dinner every day. Though this was very different from typical Japanese family, the dinner he cooked was always delicious and I felt a lot of love was put into it.

My resolve for this visit had been to dance Naruko without mistakes. We all did our best at each performance and the people in Arlington gave us great applause every time. I was very happy. We also enjoyed dancing Nagaokakyo-ondo with people in Arlington.

It felt very short and I wished we could have stayed for the whole year. I am pretty sure all other students felt the same way.

I will tell other students in Nagaokakyo about my experience and encourage them to apply for next year. I am very glad I did!

Moeka Matsumura

I learned through this 10 days visit to Arlington. Since elementary school, I had been interested in English and hoping to experience home-stay in US. When I was chosen as a member for 2010 visit group, I was very happy and determined to do my best to teach Japanese culture in US and learn US culture.

My stay with host family was completely different experience from a trip that we would stay at hotels. I stay with other Japanese students during the day and come home to my host family every evening. We spoke English all the time and as the days went by, it became easier. Also I learn a lot of English phrases and words by listening to my host family.

There were many activities that I had never done before and we met many people in Arlington. I cherish those memories. Many people in Arlington welcomed us with such warmth that I fell in love with Arlington and its people.

I also feel more confident after this trip. I would like to think what I can do, from what I learned through this visit. And I want to visit Arlington again and learn more.

Mizuki Munakata

We visited Ottoson Middle School on our second day in Arlington. We were still getting used to living with our host families and I had been worried if we could do well at school.

We danced Naruko and sang songs. The teachers and students of Ottoson welcomed us with a big applause. They also sang songs. I felt their welcome and appreciated it very much.

Then, we shadowed Ottoson students. The class was difficult to follow, but every time I asked questions, all teachers and students cheerfully and patiently helped me to understand. I felt their friendliness and kindness.

Ottoson wasn't the only place people welcomed us warmly. Many people in Arlington were kind and friendly, especially our host families. I can't even describe how kind my host family was. I want to say thank you to every one I met in Arlington.

It was an amazing experience. I will cherish my memories and I am sure this experience will help me in the future. I am so glad I went to Arlington!

Ayano Nakamura

I learned that kindness and friendliness communicates through the different culture and nationalities.

When we arrived at Arlington late at night, I was so nervous to be alone with my host family that I could not take an initiative to communicate with my host family. But I got a cold and had to tell them. I used the words I knew, and used a lot of gestures. My host family listened very attentively, looking into my eyes, and provided me hot drinks and a warm electric blanket, with very through instruction how to use it. This kindness encouraged me very much. I learned people can communicate their feelings and kindness is not something that could be blocked by the language barrier. Since then, it became much easier to talk to them and I enjoyed spending time with them.

This visit taught me many things. There are many things you can't learn unless you live with people there and you can only learn outside of your classroom. Every day was filled with wonders. I feel I learned a lot through this visit and grew up a little bit. I will study English harder so that I can enjoy English conversation more.

Keiko Nakiri

Since my childhood, I always dreamed of home-stay in the US, and my dream came true in Arlington. I will cherish this memory for the rest of my life. Memories and emotions in my mind are still so vivid – my gratitude to the people on Arlington, the frustration with the lack of my English skills, unwillingness I felt to leave Arlington, and so on.

I especially enjoyed the visit to Ottoson Middle School. I was nervous when we started shadowing Ottoson students. However, many students talked to us in a friendly manner and we made many friends. I gave them my origami and 5 yen coins, which they seem to like very much. I wanted to talk to as many people as possible and was looking forward to introduce Japanese culture. I was glad because the both purposes were fulfilled that day.

Another best memory was the time I spent with my host family. Despite my rudimentary English, we enjoyed a lot of conversation. At the beginning, I was a little unsure in the environment in which everything was so different. But talking, touching, and seeing brought me many joys and surprises. 10 days passed too quickly.

I believe this experience has huge effect on me and also it has opened the new path in my future. I want to say thank you to many people who were involved in this program. It was a wonderful, precious experience. Thank you, thank you! I want to improve my English, and go back to Arlington to see my friends again!

Maya Orihagi

The most valuable lesson I learned through this visit is this: If you have something to say and feel strongly about it, you can communicate somehow, even if your English is not fluent. The others will understand your passion to communicate and they try to understand you as hard as you try to make yourself understand. On the first day in Arlington, I didn't know what to do when I felt the language barrier. My host family was very kind and patient with me. Thanks to them, my communication skills improved during the visit. My host family encouraged me a lot by telling me my English had improved. That helped to boost my confidence, too.

My host mother cooked dinner every day. We made pizza together on the second day. It was fun to do things that you don't get to do in Japan. We also went to the shopping mall on Host Family Day. There were many cute and low-priced brands and I enjoyed shopping very much.

In San Francisco, we rode on the cable car. It was fun to climb up the hills of San Francisco on the cable car. That night, we stayed together for the first time during this trip. It felt like a school trip and we had fun. None of us wanted to go home. We had wonderful time! I know that many people helped and supported this program to make us feel that way, so I am very grateful to everyone. Thank you very much.

Marina Saito

The visit to Arlington was a wonderful experience. The most memorable event was the visit to Arlington High School. I could really see the differences between high schools of US and Japan. Teachers in US don't move from one classroom to another like Japan – students do. Class was also conducted very differently. There were more discussions and students were active participants. In Japan, most of classes were mainly lectures by teachers and we usually only take notes and answer teacher's question once in a while. So this was very interesting.

The atmosphere of the school was very different. I don't know how, but I am hoping to learn from this experience.

I also felt warm welcome of people of Arlington everywhere we went. They were patiently listen to us and tried very hard to understand us. It was very encouraging for us to communicate with them in English.

I am grateful to everyone who supported this program and hope to make this experience be a part of my future. And I look forward to the next opportunity to visit Arlington again.

Akari Samoto

The cultural differences between US and Japan were the most memorable things about this trip. In US, people say “Yes” and “No” very clearly while in Japan, we tend to be vague if we like something or not, if we want something or not, etc.

First few days in Arlington, I couldn't clearly say if I wanted to eat something or not. As a result, I ate the food that didn't agree with me and ended up being sick. I learned that though it takes a little bit of courage to say no, but it is a part of communication skills in US.

The other thing I remember is that people in Arlington were very friendly. When we shadowed Ottoson students, many students smiled at us and also talked to us, saying hi. If American students did the same thing, I wonder how many Japanese students would talk to them so friendly. I appreciate their friendliness very much and it helped us to make new friends.

We learned different ways of thinking as much as different cultures. Though sometimes I was frustrated with my own lack of English language skills, this visit taught me many things. I would like to widen my perspectives even more from this experience. Lastly, I want to say thank you to all the teachers at study sessions, the program staff member who gave us this opportunity, and all host families who welcomed us warmly, and all people we met in Arlington!

Mika Taniyama

11 days in Arlington seemed to go by in a blink. Everything was big in US. Houses, yards were big, not to mention food size. Even a small sandwich or burger seemed as big as my own face.

My host family was a big one. We all sat down together at dinner table and there were many conversations at the dinner. I could tell that my host family did their best to make me happy and comfortable. I felt that hospitality and the gratitude are both universal, no matter what country and what language.

Though it's been only a year since I started learning English and my language skill was very low, my host family was very patient and always listen to me carefully and attentively. So thanks to them, I managed to make myself understood. I learned that if you make and effort to listen and communicate, you can manage.

I learned so much during these 11 days. It was a very precious opportunity and I am grateful to everyone.

I want to study English even harder and improve my language skills, so that next time I go abroad, I can understand more and I can also talk about things I couldn't this time.

Ken Uetsuki

I learned there were so many cultural differences between US and Japan. For example, US juice of small size would be large size in Japan. Cars drive on the right on the street in US and on the left in Japan. The mouse of computer clicks differently, too.

The biggest difference was how people communicate with each other. In Arlington, many strangers both men and women talked me in friendly manners. I don't think it would happen in Japan and I wish more Japanese would be like that. It made me feel great and I have no doubt that Japanese society would be more cheerful and positive if we could be like that, too.

I had many wonderful experiences throughout this visit and learned a lot. I am not sure if I made myself understood well, but I enjoyed it very much. I am very proud of this experience and will never forget this visit.

Kotarou Urakawa

This visit was 10 days, but it was more than 6-month long project for us, since we started our study session last fall. My experience continues. My family will host a student from Arlington in July. I hope he/she can feel the way I did in Arlington.

This visit was filled with wonder. The culture was so different though we are on the same planet and we are the same human beings! Not only culture, but also the climate and the scenery were different, too. I would never have learned if I had been only in Japan. We learned so much through our host family. If we had stayed in hotels, I don't think we would have learned any of them.

Despite all those differences, we still communicated. Yes, there was language barrier. Sometimes I couldn't make myself understood clearly and I couldn't understand others either. However, when we managed to understand each other, the joy was tremendous. The challenge of language made that joy more rewarding.

My host family asked me a lot of questions and we had great conversations. I learned a lot of vocabularies. It was challenging the first couple of days, due to jetlag. But I learned that other students from Nagaokakyo were also struggling with language and realized I'm not the only one. So I decided to talk to my host family more. Things changed dramatically since then.

Before the trip, I felt "I may try this trip," but now I feel "I had to" – it was that fulfilling trip.

Chika Wada

My visit to Arlington was filled with first time experiences; my first trip abroad, first time watching baseball game in the park, first time boarding ship, etc. Every experience was precious for me. But among all, I cherish the memory of sharing Japanese culture with my host family.

First, we did origami. I only know how to make cranes, so that was what I taught them. I used the electronic dictionary to look up the words I didn't know. It took long time, but when we finish, I felt the great sense of achievement. And I was glad to see host family smiled and said thank you.

We also did Otedama (bean-bag juggling.) Actually, my host family could juggle very well already and they showed me how to juggle, so our positions were switched. Thanks to their teaching, I learned how to juggle!

I learned there were other ways to communicate than just language. You can use gestures, draw pictures and I think there must be many other ways.

Arlington and Nagaokakyo are far away from each other in distance, but the relationship between the two communities is very close. That's what Sister City Program is about. We learned a lot because it was home-stay, not the trip with hotels. I wonder how this experience will influence my future. I want to say thank you to every one who were involved in this program.

Tsuyoshi Yagi

Thought I am in Japan now, the memory of 11 days in Arlington is too vivid to forget.

I had never been outside Japan before this visit. I was hoping to succeed in communicating with host family, but my mind was filled with anxiety.

But as soon as we met our host family and the people of Arlington, my anxiety disappeared. They were very kind and welcomed us as if we had been their own family. I was very touched by their kindness. Many friends we made in Ottoson were patient and kind as well with our English.

I realized, then, that I shouldn't keep silent for the fear for making grammatical mistakes. That shuts down the communication. It would be so much better to speak out, even if it is just words and not a complete sentence. That way, I could carry on a much smoother conversation.

I experience at least some part of American life. People were kind to each other while speaking out their minds honestly. Also they greet and acknowledge each other a lot at home, on the street, at schools, everywhere. They value the connection with others. I think this is something we Japanese could learn from them.

I feel that I can see things from wider perspectives now. I want to say thank you to everyone who gave me this chance. And I will never forget everyone I met in Arlington and fellow Nagaokakyo students who visited Arlington together. Thank you everyone!

Hisashi Yukawa

When we danced and sang in Arlington, the people's reaction was very enthusiastic and it made us feel wonderful. That was my most treasured memory. Also people were very friendly there. At Ottoson Middle School, many students talked me in such a friendly manner and I had wonderful time.

I was also surprised by the size of the houses in Arlington. They were so much bigger than Japanese houses and they were more separated from each other than Japan.

One day, I went to the vocational high school my host family's son was attending. The campus was very large and each subject had its own building. I was very impressed. I also liked their bike path very much and wished we had something like this in Nagaokakyo.

I ate a hamburger at Burger King in the Airport of San Francisco. I was amazed by its size. Their small size drink was as big as large size drink in Japan. What a bargain! Now in Japan, I feel like I am paying too much for drinks.

There were two parties in Arlington on our last day. I was surprised that parties took place in host family's homes. It would be absolutely impossible to hold such a large party in individual home in Japan.

When we came home, it was so hot that I wanted to go straight back to Arlington. I am so glad that I was the member for this visit group. Thank you very much.