



Hot Springs National Park Sister City Foundation
Teacher Scholarship Recipient's trip to Hanamaki, Japan
June 2013

Dawn Shinn, Lake Hamilton

Our trip to Hanamaki was more than I expected. It was a humbling, and rewarding opportunity. Before we left we were told that the people of Japan put more emphasis on the "group" rather than the "individual". I didn't really grasp this concept until I saw it in action all around me. Some examples are: my host mother had to get up at 4:30 in the morning on a Sunday to go cut grass along public roads with other citizens from her neighborhood. A group of school children were on a field trip at the Kenji Museum.

One little boy kept running around and bumping into us. Our tour guide took the boy by the arm and firmly instructed him to walk..then patted him on the head. The boy bowed and then walked instead of ran. Every store we entered, whether it was a gas station, or a nice clothing store, the attendant would call out a pleasant greeting. When a student answers a question in class, the student will stand and everyone will give that person their full attention. There are so many more examples, but these are just some of the ways I saw more emphasis on the "group" rather than the "individual".

My most memorable experience was when I stayed with the host family. The grandmother had an amazing garden. She let me pick flowers and leaves from her garden and then she taught me how to ink press them onto a scarf. It made a beautiful gift that I will treasure forever. In addition, I really enjoyed the Onsen experience. It was very unique and unlike anything I had ever done before. But it was incredibly relaxing and a memorable.

I was most surprised by the subtle differences between our cultures. For example, when I was shopping at the mall I would hand my money to the attendant. A few times they looked surprised and maybe even a little offended. My host mother later informed me that passing money hand to hand is considered very cheap and dirty. You are supposed to put the money on a little tray and slide the tray to the attendant. In return, they will slide your change back to you. Even when people give money as gifts, they will wrap it in tissue paper first so that it is not passed hand to hand.

Some of the things that I plan to implement in my classroom are...I will start holding my students more accountable for the classroom. I will make them more responsible for the cleaning and maintaining...they will stand when called upon and answering questions...and I will set up a mini-government within each class. I learned this from one of the schools that we visited. The class is divided into groups of 4. Each group will have a leader. Every quarter that position will move to a different person within the group. These leaders are responsible for overseeing their group...reporting to the teacher, collecting papers, passing out papers, etc. I am also hoping to effectively implement a sister-school relationship with the help of other Lake Hamilton teachers that have visited Hanamaki.

Our trip to Hanamaki helped me change my view of the world because I realized how incredibly spoiled and self-centered we are in America. I was embarrassed and humbled. I also saw that regardless of language, religion, culture, etc...there are genuinely good people everywhere.

Samantha Pulz, Lake Hamilton

I absolutely loved Japan and especially Hanamaki! First of all, I never expected the scenery to be so much like Hot Springs and America in general. You think another country half way around the world will be so different and so scary, yet Hanamaki was very similar and so very warm and friendly! Seeing that people who live so far away can have so many things in common reminded me that understanding and knowing this makes us more united from so far away. I did expect the kindness we received because I was told by so many people that we would see this; however, I was taken back by how genuine the kindness was and that it came from everyone even common strangers. This trip opened my eyes to a way of living and a new way of respecting others.

Some of the best experiences I had in Hanamaki were definitely meeting all of the people involved with the sister city program. I felt like they all took us in and took such wonderful care of us! Kind of like they were our Japanese parents! I loved the dinner we went to with the exchange committee members. This dinner made me realize that although we are from such different cultures, we both like to hang out with friends and laugh and have fun! Seeing the schools was so so interesting. It was really eye opening

that they learn English. Out of all the languages, they learn English. It was flattering. I loved loved loved the elementary school and how the teachers and staff put so much trust in the children that they can let them have real free time everyday to do whatever and when I say whatever I mean whatever they want to do for 20 minutes. That showed me how well behaved and respectful the children are. Something that was very difficult for me to wrap my head around was the teachers working so much and on weekends. I have a lot of respect for how much they care about their jobs and their students. I don't know if I could do that? Something I will never forget is my host family taking me to make pottery. They took me to a 120 year old house and I got to learn to make pottery on a wheel! It was so cool and right up my alley!! I am not a cryer at all, but I did cry when I left them. The host family I stayed with reminded me so much of my family. They were so gentle and loving. They treated me like I was their child. I was only there for 2 nights, it was amazing that they made me feel that way in such a short period of time. Just thinking about them brings tears to my eyes. My host mother even hugged me! I know this is a big deal because I saw no one else hug there!

I really want to teach the respect I saw in Japan. I want to teach this not only to my students, but also to my children I have someday. Not only the respect for each other but respect for things around them as well. I am also really interested in finding a Kenji children's book in English. I became very interested in him while I was there! I would love to teach about him in my classroom! I can not wait to tell my student about the bonzi trees and how much time and patience goes into them! I have pictures because we went to the bonzi festival! I have a summer kimono that I will wear to school too! We have talked about doing a Christmas around the world this year and I cannot wait because I am going to do Japan!

I hope this is enough because I feel like I could go on for days!!

Bernice Lowery, Langston Elementary

The trip to Japan was a truly remarkable experience and one that I will never forget.

Some outstanding highlights were:

1. The countryside was beautiful. I noticed the similarity to our city with the beautiful mountains surrounding Hanamaki.

2. The people were so gracious and friendly wherever we went - from the hotel staff to the employees of the city to the school staff and students - we were met with kindness and incredible generosity.

3. My home visit was a great time of learning how the Japanese people live. Also the family was so kind to take me to a bonsai festival, a pottery shop, and a river boat trip all of which were unique and special. They opened their home to me even though they spoke very little English and we enjoyed a special bond in a short amount of time.

4. The school visits were interesting and I learned a lot about Japanese education. I will always remember how we were greeted by the students and their eagerness to speak with us. I intend to show videos we took of the schools and students there.

If any one thing stood out to me it would be the customary parting. Time and time again when we left a place, the people would watch us as we drove away and wave until we were out of sight. It has been brought to my attention that partings in America are rather abrupt. Even when we left the hotel for the last time, some of the staff had made a sign telling us goodbye and waved to us as we drove away.

I am anxious to get into my classroom this fall and share with my students pictures and experiences. There are so many memories that I hold dear regarding the trip and I am ago grateful that I was allowed to go.

Katherine Combs, Lake Hamilton

When I think back over our trip to Hanamaki, I feel a rush of emotions: wonderment at the beauty of the snow-topped mountains, the family rice fields, and the lush, green, clean countryside; embarrassment for the many, many times I handed money directly to cashiers; pride for conquering chopsticks (although even the simplest dish can still be a challenge) and Japanese onsen; disgust for gulping down espresso before realizing the "liquid sweetener" I'd poured in was actually olive oil; delight at the thought of experiencing Japanese karaoke, giggling during photo booth pictures, and singing Taylor Swift songs with my host, Ai Suzuki...

Most of all though, when I think of Hanamaki, I feel undeserving. The friends we made in Japan were absolutely the most genuine, kind, gracious people whom I have ever met. Our translator opened her home and gardens to us and shared stories with us over breakfast. We complimented a stamp one day and received a beautiful, hand-carved stamp the next. Ai Suzuki's mom slept on the floor so I could have her room during the home stay. Countless Japanese citizens apologized to me, a visitor to their country, because they had poor English skills. Ichiro Fudai greeted us with gifts and advice, and he bid farewell with still more gifts and advice. An entire school prepared dances, songs and cheers for us, and then applauded for us.

Hanamaki's mayor told us that he hoped to learn much from his American friends; I hope, however, that we will learn much from them. Our Hanamaki friends understand that our children, and our grandchildren's children, will be using this same planet and we must, therefore, take care of it and teach our children to care for it and each other. They place emphasis on the community's well-being rather than the comfort of an individual, and they display visible respect for self, family, and elders. How many problems in our own schools and communities could be solved by enforcing these same values?

In closing, I'd like to share part of my final blog post (<http://katcombs.blogspot.com/>) from our Japan trip. "Dear Sister City Hanamaki, Thanks for the memories. I'll cherish them forever! Your people's kindness is far greater than words can express and imaginations can picture. I hope we'll meet again someday. See you!