

Article by Layne Sakamoto, 2009 GLA scholarship recipient

From JACL Digest 12/23/14 - 1/6/15

Kakehashi Project Participants Share Experiences on NBC News.com

Washington D.C. - Three Kakehashi Project participants who visited Japan in October 2014 recently shared their experiences with NBC News.

The Kakehashi Project, sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan Foundation, Laurasian Institution, Fullbright Japan, and JACL was a short-term student exchange program designed to facilitate a deeper understanding of Japan and create connections between students of both cultures.



Layne's was one of three stories on the website:

Layne Sakamoto, 22, UCLA:

I chose to participate in the Kakehashi program because I wanted to get in touch with my cultural roots. I had never been to Japan. My grandmother, or baachan, is from the Kanagawa-ken prefecture and always talks about her time growing up there. I wanted to see this beautiful place she speaks about so fondly.

I've always been interested in studying the Japanese language, and to get a better sense of who I am as a Japanese American. I was curious to see how life in Japan compares to our lives in America, and how we -- as Japanese Americans -- carry with us both customs.

As soon as we landed at Narita Airport, we were surrounded by people who looked like us. But I was struck by how people with such similar appearances can be so different. What stood out to me over time was just how kind the people in Japan are. On a rainy day, we visited Tokyo National Museum, and I was caught outside without an umbrella. An older woman passed by and offered me her umbrella. I politely declined, but she insisted, showing me she had another in her bag. She refused to take "no" for an answer, and I gratefully accepted her offer. I remember thinking this wouldn't be common in America.

The sight of the disaster-stricken areas in Sendai still sticks with me -- the empty streets, houses with just their foundations remaining -- the images are clear in my memory. It saddened me to learn that many people are not allowed to move back to the area as the soil is contaminated.

Staying at the Bunke ryokan (traditional Japanese inn) in Fukushima is something I'll never forget. We slept on tatami mats, bathed in hot springs, eat traditional meals, and wore yukatas. Because wi-fi wasn't readily accessible there, we all bonded really well too.

Before this trip, the only connection I had to Japan was my baachan -- the only one from my immediate family born there. But now, I have my own stories, my own memories, and my own experiences. I hope to visit Japan again, to become more involved in connecting our two cultures, and to learn more about the country that defines part of who I am.