Two Worlds Put Together

“Karson, can you write something in Japanese for me?” Throughout my life, I have heard that question asked to me dozens of times, and I would always respond with a quick, “no.” Growing up as a fifth-generation Japanese American, I have never felt connected to my Japanese heritage. My family and I can’t speak or write Japanese, we all speak English at home. Oftentimes, I felt a sense of division between me and my culture, and I questioned whether I was “Japanese enough.”

During the fall of 2023, when I heard my school was asking students to host students from our sister city, Kashiwa, Japan, I knew I had to participate. Although I had little to no knowledge of Japanese, I felt that this would be a great opportunity to learn more about my culture. I also wanted to show these students how I live as a Japanese American teenager. I then immediately signed up for the program and waited eagerly for their arrival.

When I met my host student for the first time, I was immediately drawn by his cheerful personality. When I was talking to him, he told me that he was extremely excited to go to America for the first time. One thing that he made clear to me was that he wanted to experience the “American culture,” so I ended up taking him to get burgers for his first day in America. After getting burgers, we went trick or treating, something that many of the exchange students were excited about. They were all excited about the costumes and candy they received.

A couple of days later, we went to Knott’s Berry Farm, a theme park that I’ve been going to ever since I was a child. It was great having my exchange student experience something that’s had such a great impact on my “American” childhood. We got to ride on many rides and I even bought a funnel cake for them to try. Many of the students loved the theme park

I additionally learned many new phrases in Japanese through the exchange students. He taught me a few slang words I started using, such as “sugoi,” or “kakkoii,” both used when expressing excitement. He also taught me a common phrase, “itadakimasu,” that is stated before eating to express gratitude for the meal. I started saying these phrases and the exchange students would smile and laugh, which made me feel more accepted.

I also noticed our differences as well, despite both of us being Japanese. A small difference is our preferences in food, he loves to eat American food, like hamburgers and fries. Ironically, I don't enjoy eating American food. I also learned that he mainly eats Japanese food when he is home, but I enjoy eating many foods.

However, by the end of the week, I realized that although we are the same race, our cultures are different. Whether it be humor, personalities, mannerisms, or language, we are all unique in our own way. At the end of the exchange program, I understood how special it is to be Japanese-American. I may have a Japanese last name and “look Japanese,” however, I am an American, to be exact, a *Japanese-American teenager*, who is not fluent in Japanese but can experience a unique mix between both American and Japanese cultures and customs.