



Sakura, Shisa, and Soba ... Oh my!

My global adventure living in Okinawa, Japan



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Konnichiwa. Welcome to the Land of the Rising Sun. Where parks are lined with sakura cherry blossoms and homes are surrounded by guardian Shisa statues and sacred shrines. Living in the Far East as a military child, surrounded by new people and a new culture helped broaden, enrich, and diversify my world. Attending school on this small island surrounded by the Pacific Ocean had an important impact on my education and life. In Okinawa, I learned the hands-on lessons of how unique and interdependent all peoples, cultures, and nature are, and how through diversity we become united. Okinawa, Japan has been my favorite place that I have lived in my life so far because of its welcoming respectful people, diverse and unique cultural experiences, and as a launching point for travel opportunities across the Far East.

Okinawa, Japan is the southernmost prefecture of Japan. It has more than 150 smaller islands, known as the Ryukyu Islands, with Okinawa being the largest, with over a million people living there. The weather in Okinawa is what you would imagine a tropical island to have, warm sunny days with soft breezes coming off the ocean waters. Okinawa, Japan is located directly in the Pacific Ring of Fire, where many earthquakes and volcanoes occur. And, it is my favorite place that I have lived in my life so far.

As a Marine Corps family, we moved from Lithia, Florida to Okinawa, Japan, leaving my small, loving Montessori classroom, full of children from every walk of life, for a larger school in a more diverse neighborhood. My new school was welcoming, but being a Bechtel “Bulldog” was just a small part of my new island life. I collected sea glass on the beach, wore colorful Japanese kimonos, picked cherry blossoms at Mt. Yaedake, ate Soba noodles at the café, swam in the waters off of Iejima Island, ate sushi at the sushi go round restaurant, saw Eisa performers dancing to the taiko drums, watched my father compete in dragon boat racing, and even climbed Mt. Fuji (12,388 feet)! Okinawa opened my eyes to the world’s beauty and diversity.

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Still, moving across the globe was a challenging experience. I had never lived overseas. I was anxious about the life, culture, and people. Happily, I came to love Okinawa. Although the community outside the military base was not as diverse as in America, with most people being Okinawan, I developed a great respect for the Okinawan people and Japanese culture. Even though I was clearly not Asian in appearance, being of Egyptian descent, I was always greeted respectfully and warmly with an “*Irasshaimase*” and “*Konnichiwa*” by every Okinawan I met. My skin color, language, and religion was easily accepted and intriguing to the locals. I was different yet unique. At the Regional Spelling Bee in Tokyo, almost everyone was Japanese. I was the only American contestant (I was also the shortest!). At school, I was surrounded by military children like me who came from different backgrounds, traveled across the globe, and enjoyed embracing new cultures. Our diversity made us more united and connected. It did not matter whether a parent was a Marine Corps Colonel or Air Force Airman, military or civilian, Black or White. In this military community, a person’s defining features and society’s “labels” had no meaning. What mattered was one’s character and actions, especially as American “Ambassadors” in Okinawa, representing ourselves, our families, and our nation. Okinawa and the Okinawans welcomed me and helped me become the best global citizen that I could be.

Living in this unique environment, I learned that my own diversity made me a better understanding and accepting global citizen. Each new person I met had a different story to share, which added to my own story, and the world’s. While living in Okinawa, my family took every opportunity to travel and explore the neighboring cities and islands in Japan and across the Far East. From feeding bananas to the monkeys at the Monkey Forest and visiting the ancient palaces in Bali, Indonesia to taking the trolley up to Victoria Peak and visiting the giant Tian-Tian Buddha Statue on Lantau Island in Hong Kong. From visiting the Sanrio Hello Kitty store to seeing the Robot

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Show in the electric city of Tokyo. From having dinner by the Burj Al-Khalifa and swimming in the Arabian Gulf at the Atlantis Palm in Dubai to visiting the golden shrine in the ancient capital of Kyoto, Japan. All these experiences gave me both a local and global perspective on how valuable the diversity of the world is, and how interconnected we all are, each with our own unique story and perspective to discover and share, regardless of race, religion, color, or gender. I love traveling and I hope that one day my family and I will return to Okinawa and enjoy the sakura, shisa, soba, and so much more!