

BACK FROM JAPAN

Student ambassador Caroline Diaz returns from educational program overseas

Teenagers are always looking for a way out: a way out of doing the dishes, a way out of studying, a way out of the country! Plano resident and Clark High School student Caroline Diaz traveled to Japan in June with People To People Student Ambassadors, a program that provides international educational opportunities for students in fifth through 12th grades. Diaz is back and raves, “it was one of the most unbelievable experiences of my life.”

It was 1956. Bob Hope, Olympic champion Jesse Owens, Hallmark Cards founder Joyce Hall, and Walt Disney sat shoulder to shoulder with their friend President Dwight D. Eisenhower to launch an organization that would “promote peace through understanding” across the world. People To People Student Ambassador Programs was born.

Fifty years later, on March 26, 2006, 34 high school students sat shoulder to shoulder in a meeting to prepare for their two-week trip to Japan. This was Caroline Diaz’s first time to participate in People To People. Her parents, Les and Laurie Diaz of Plano, suggested she go after she received an invitation in the mail. Students must be interviewed to be accepted into the program and may receive high school credit. The teacher leaders, or chaperones, for this trip were Jerry and Jane Wheeler from Sunnyvale, TX; Jennifer Green from Mesquite, TX; and Becky Porter from Aubrey, TX.

Like a stiff military sergeant, Jerry Wheeler administered the itinerary for departure: “On June 10, we’re going to meet at DFW at 9:45 a.m. I didn’t say 9:50 a.m.” His tone was sharp. “We leave at 11:45 a.m. and we’re going to land at 3:30 p.m. Osaka time. It will be busy.

Kids, let me tell you something: there’s going to be people wall to wall like you have never seen before in your lifetime.”

It wasn’t so much the masses that left an impression on Diaz as it was the Japanese’s friendly manners. “The Japanese people were very polite,” she said. “They were so willing to help us, and everything that they could offer us, they offered us.” This is what Diaz enjoyed most about her trip, this and “the other side” of Japan: “not just the side that you see in America – Tokyo and buildings everywhere. In reality there’s countryside and mountains.”

Mount Fuji, Japan’s highest mountain, stands at 12,388 feet tall in Honshu, Japan. Diaz is one of 200,000 people that will climb Mount Fuji this year. The hike is divided into ten stations. Diaz hiked from the base station, or the fifth station, which is 7,562 feet high, to the sixth station. “The hike was fun but difficult. It’s volcanic rock so there’s no grass and you slide!”

For two days of the trip, the students visited Ogasa High School in Kikugawa, Japan. “The first day we arrived there was an opening ceremony for a festival and it was unbelievable,” said Diaz. “The high



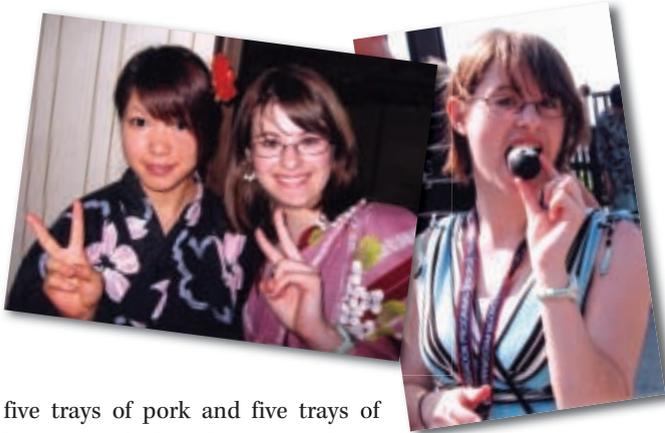
Fifteen-year-old Caroline Diaz brought home many souvenirs from her trip to Japan, including the kimono she’s wearing, slippers, fans, chopsticks, and postcards.

school band played and that was fun to hear them.”

Students spent the next day at the festival conversing with other Japanese students and playing games. Most students flocked to the English Club where they played Twister for hours and listened to the Beatles.

For three nights, Diaz and her fellow student ambassador, Sadie Byboth from Wylie, stayed with an Ogasa High School student named Eri Matauoto and her family. “The family owned a strawberry farm and it was gigantic!” said Diaz. “Sadie and I got to pick strawberries off the vines and eat them. They were really sweet and pretty addicting!” she said.

Diaz ate a lot of fish, noodles, white rice, and even Takoyaki (octopus)! What surprised her, though, was how much beef the Japanese ate. “For our last meal, there was a big pot of boiling water and



Left: Eri Matauoto and Caroline Diaz wearing summer kimonos. Caroline (right) eats a black egg boiled in Japan's hot springs. "They have this superstition that if you eat one black egg, you lose seven years; if you eat two black eggs, you lose 14 years more; and if you eat three black eggs, you'll have a stomachache!" Below, Caroline with her fellow student ambassadors.

five trays of pork and five trays of beef. We picked up the meat with our chopsticks and held it in the water until it was cooked; then we dipped it in soy sauce. That was one of the best meals I think I've ever had," Diaz said. "There were six of us at a table, and it's funny because I think between all of us we ate an entire cow!" she laughed.

One of Diaz's favorite dishes was miso soup, which is tofu and seaweed. She discovered that the Japanese use chopsticks to eat soup. "They use chopsticks for everything. For miso soup, they pick up the tofu with their chopsticks and then slurp it. Slurping is complimenting. You're supposed to slurp if you enjoy the soup and it is cooked well," said Diaz. "We had a lot of fun slurping! I think we annoyed some of the delegation leaders!" she laughed again.

The student ambassadors were encouraged throughout the entire trip to participate in Japanese customs. "You see in movies how they take their shoes off before they go in a building," said Diaz, "and they do that everywhere. We went to a mall and before we could get into the booths to try on our clothes, we had to take off our shoes."

Diaz raved about Tokyo's high buildings and flashing, colorful lights. "At moments, it was all surreal," she said. The students visited Akihabara, Tokyo's world-famous "Electric Town" known for its affordable electronics and computers. Diaz observed, "Stores had MP3 Players, cameras and laptops that haven't been released in the United States yet."

The students also engaged in many educational opportunities. They visited the Hiroshima Peace

Sasaki, who was two years old when the atomic bomb hit. She was very healthy growing up, but when she was 12 years old she got leukemia. She believed that if she could fold 1,000 paper cranes she'd get better." Diaz continued, "In Japan, cranes (which come from the Japanese tradition of origami) symbolize health and peace – I think like the dove here. Sometimes Sadako used her medicine bandages because paper was too expensive. Well, she never actually ended up folding 1,000 cranes. She died and her death shocked her classmates so much that they started to raise money for a memorial. Now there's a very large statue of a girl holding a crane and that's her."

The Children's Peace Monument, also called the "Tower of a Thousand Cranes," stands nine meters high in the midst of a collection of colorful cranes offered to the park throughout the year.

Along with learning some of Japan's history, the student ambassadors learned about the Shinto and Buddhism religions. In Kyoto, formerly the Imperial Capital of Japan, the students visited the temple, Sanjusangendo. It was originally built in 1164 and features a hall containing 1,001

Memorial Museum and learned about the devastation brought on by the 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "There

figures of Kannon-Bosatsu, the Japanese goddess of mercy. "Sanjusangendo" means a hall with 33 bays – the number 33 is sacred in Buddhism. It is believed that Buddha saves mankind by disguising himself in 33 different forms.

Diaz learned that in Japan the Shinto and Buddhism religions blended. She said, "At my home-stay they had a Buddhist shrine, but they also had Shinto gods on their wall. And in one of the temples, there was a humongous Buddha on the altar and they had sake (rice wine) which is odd because alcohol is a big 'no no' in Buddhism. But sake, a Shinto wine, is sacred. So I asked Keiko, the Japanese delegation leader who showed us around, how they know which religion to follow in different instances. She said, 'We pick and choose which one we like.' That was interesting."

The student ambassadors were required to keep a journal of their experiences in Japan. "I encourage anyone who can participate with People to People to do so because you may never get a chance to experience anything like it again," Diaz said.

Will she ever return? This traveling student has already plotted a way out: "I'm trying to convince my uncle who goes there on business to take me. Visiting Japan was one of the best experiences of my life and I think it always will be."

For more information on People to People Student Ambassadors, visit www.studentambassadors.org.

