

Host report: Shion Hara *Pam Uhrig*

My host was Shion Hara, who was a member of the Japanese Dance group that visited Milwaukee in the previous year. She is in 5th grade at the elementary school in Narita. She lives with her mother, Yuka and her father, Kiichi, and 2 cats.

On our first day together, Yuka met me at the hotel. Her lovely smile stayed with us all day as she escorted me to all of our activities. She was always ready to help; with the kimonos, the lunch at the restaurant, and following our guide at the temple in Narita. She was always ready to take me everywhere in her cute little pink car.

At the end of our group activities, we drove to her home. It was an interesting ride through the country and took about 20 to 30 minutes. The house looks to be a very traditional style Japanese home. We left our shoes at the entrance and I was given a pair of slippers. Yuka showed me my room which was a partitioned section of a large room with tatami mats. There were blankets on the floor to protect the mats and Yuka put up a small table and chair for me to use for the four nights I would be their guest. At the time it was so foreign to me to be on these mats in a room that was surrounded by decorative panels and no bed. One shelf had a few dolls dressed in traditional kimonos and there was a statue of Buddha in front of a wall hanging. It was a very peaceful and comforting room to stay in.

It wasn't long before Yuka said that it was time to go. We got into the car with Shion who was very shy and quiet. We tried to communicate with the translators on their phones, but the translations did not usually make sense. We arrived at Bay House Camellia where all of the host families had put together a wonderful buffet for our group. After the meal the dancers performed fully dressed in their kimonos and the fan dance was absolutely stunning. Shion is a very graceful and beautiful dancer, and she was amazing to watch as she performed with the other wonderful dancers.

After the party, we headed back to the house. Yuka slid open a panel in my room and took out a mattress and some quilts. It turned out to be a very cozy and comfortable bed on the floor. The wall panels were clear on the bottom so that I could see outside when I was laying down. It was very quiet and peaceful at night and the only sound was the meowing of the cat.



Every morning Yuka served me an absolutely amazing breakfast that included a variety of Japanese and American dishes and coffee! She made eggs perfectly with just the right amount of ham or bacon. Plus the addition of the Japanese food was an extra treat. I especially enjoyed the fresh fruit with persimmons. On our last morning together, Shion and Kiichi joined us for breakfast. It was a feast with eggs, bacon, lettuce salad and pancakes served with the maple syrup I had brought from WI and Hershey's chocolate syrup!

My host parents were so accommodating, always bringing me to the city every morning and picking me up in the evening. On each drive I noticed more and more of the countryside and wished that we were able to communicate more about what I was seeing. Each evening they had something different and wonderful planned for dinner. On our first night we had a wonderful bowl of soup called Oden. It was full of many foods foreign to me and it was interesting to try and translate what each one was. Our conversations were getting more relaxed and I was happy to have a glass of beer with my meal! On our second night, Shion had invited 2 of her school friends and we had a wonderful party on a large table set up on the tatami mats. It was a buffet of rice with chop suey, and a platter of American foods. The girls were especially excited about the bowl of Halloween candy for dessert and the small cr me puffs. On our last evening we all went to the mall which was such a wonderful experience. We had fun walking around and getting in the Christmas spirit! After the mall we went to a restaurant where little blue plates of food came around on a track and you could also order from the menu on a screen at the table. It was fun to sample so many different foods and watch Shion as she played the games on the screen (even though it was a bummer we never won!)

I can't thank the Hara family enough for all of their generosity and their ability to make me feel so welcome in their home. There were moments when we realized that the lack of understanding caused some confusion, but the communication improved every day and I was glad that we had the four nights to get to know each other better. The many gifts they gave me were so personal and thoughtful and I was overcome with their generosity. Shion surprised me with a bag of goodies that she picked out for my grandchildren and the tea cup and tea was truly beautiful and will be cherished always.

After being a host for others in my home in the past, I now know what it feels like to be the guest. It has broadened and deepened my understanding of how the differences in a culture can be overcome with patience and understanding. I feel so fortunate to have been their guest and would not have changed a thing. Thank you Chiba Wisconsin for the amazing experience.

