

Senior Counselor Messages 2016

Alec - UC Berkeley —Cycling

Being the Head Senior Counselor for SCOA was one of the most challenging, yet rewarding experiences that I've ever had. Challenging because it took perseverance and flexibility to manage 70+ non-English speaking campers and 20+ counselors day after day without having any prior counselor experience, but rewarding because of the huge smiles on campers' faces that would greet me every day. One of the most touching moments for me was playing whiffle ball with an autistic child who, whenever he would hit the ball, would emote the most infectious smile you can imagine. Being able to make a hands-on difference in this child's life — as well as those of many others — gave me a sense of purpose that summer that I would have had trouble achieving had I spent my summer working an internship in front of a computer screen.

What made the SCOA experience even more special was the opportunity to lead SCOA's Global Leadership Program with 17 college students from Rikkyo University, helping them develop skills necessary for success in the professional world. The most powerful moment of the camp came when we all shared stories of challenges and vulnerabilities that we'd experienced in our lives. There wasn't a dry eye in the house, and despite the fact that the camp was just 24 hours, both the students and counselors underwent a staggering amount of transformation and personal growth, creating lifelong bonds in the process.

The counselors also became a tight-knit family throughout the summer, which gave us the opportunity to grow friendships with both American and Japanese counselors. Furthermore, J.R. and Keiko both invest an immense amount of time and energy into making SCOA the best it can be for both campers and counselors, and want nothing more than to see counselors succeed and for the campers to have a great time.

All told, the combination of working outdoors with kids for an extended period of time in a foreign country is a uniquely challenging and rewarding experience that won't come again. You'll work your ass off at SCOA — that's for sure — but at the end of the summer, thanks to the personal development, the friendships, the introduction to Japanese culture and the difference you'll make in the lives of hundreds of children, you'll be glad you did.

Dani – UC Davis - Gymnastics

SCOA was one of the best experiences I have ever had. It allowed me to dive into and immerse myself into a culture that I knew very little about, meet new people – young and old – from all over, and just try something that I never thought of doing before. The campers are what truly made this opportunity memorable. Even though the time spent with them is short, the experiences and memories you are able to create with the kids is something that will last forever. The campers I had the pleasure of working with impacted my life in ways I can't even describe. Seeing their smiles and hearing their laughs is what I lived for while being their counselor. If the kids were having a great time, then I know I had done my part.

The friendships with not only the campers, but also the counselors made my time at SCOA time well spent. There is not better description than family when describing the connections that were made between us counselors. Before even meeting each other, I knew this group of people were going to be some of the greatest. We spent so much time together, and being student-athletes, we fed off of each other and drive each other to be our bests! SCOA is just something special, and I am so happy I had the opportunity to experience it.

Danica – Washington – Track

As a college athlete in a sport with 2 seasons, I never thought I would get the chance, or have the funds to leave the country during my college career. SCOA changed that, it gave me an opportunity that I couldn't afford to miss. The 6-week trip Japan over the summer is, by far one of the best experiences I have ever had. It was also one of the most difficult experiences. The children are adorable and kind, though their English is usually limited, the games are fun and exciting, though they do get repetitive, and I still cannot help but sing “Alive, Awake, Alert, Enthusiastic” when I wake up some mornings (I’m still deciding if that is a good thing, or a bad thing). Yet, be it spending the mornings singing songs and waking the kids up or having a meal with them I will never forget the looks on their faces, the excitement that they had for the day’s activities or enthusiastic want to do a pyramid. I learned just as much, if not more than they did about the Japanese culture, the language, the community and way of life.

SCOA provided a community of likeminded people that wanted to give the kids a good experience, people that wanted to share American culture and learn Japanese culture. It gave a chance to create connections with people that I never otherwise would have met and to explore the mountainsides of places that I probably would have never seen. SCOA taught me perseverance (especially after the 7th camp). It taught me to think on my feet and to react and connect with others without using words, to understand without knowing the language. I think SCOA is the best chance for those of us who love sports, and kids, and culture to get out of our own country and enjoy everything at once.

Savannah – Washington – Track

I had such an amazing experience with SCOA. At first I was a little nervous because I knew that I was stepping outside of my comfort zone but I quickly found that it was well worth it. Traveling to Japan, immersing yourself in the culture, making relationships with the kids, and lasting friendships with the other senior counselors are memories that will be unforgettable.

There is something extremely special about making a connection with someone despite language and culture barriers and who've you only known for a short period of time. Some of my most favorite memories were the moments when campers and I would make a connection without ever knowing what the other was trying to say. One of my campers from the very first session spoke very little English so I remember being unsure if he was having a good time or even liked me. But towards the last session I received a postcard from him saying that he had a lot of fun at SCOA. This postcard meant so much to me and I will cherish it forever. :) Overall the kids are awesome. If you love kids, you will love the SCOA experience.

Additionally, being in Japan was amazing. The food is great, the bugs are big, the toilet seats are warm, and the people are very nice. We visited many cities but I think my favorite was Rikuzentakata, a city devastated by a large tsunami 5 years ago. She invited us into her home, taught us how to properly drink tea and hold chopsticks, made us a lot of great food, and shared her story with us. She is an inspiration to many and I feel very blessed to have gotten the opportunity to meet her.

Lastly, I truly loved the group of counselors I shared this experience with and will cherish the memories I made with them.

Danielle – UCLA – Ultimate Frisbee

Being a senior counselor for SCOA was one of the best experiences of my life. I had the opportunity to live in an amazing country, meet hundreds of new people, and make lifelong friendships. Even though we couldn't speak the same language, I valued being able to connect and laugh with the children through simple acts such as drawing pictures, making bracelets together, or reading bedtime stories. I also enjoyed getting to form such a strong bond with the senior and Japanese counselors. It was a pleasure getting to work with my friends every day to create the best possible camp experience for the children. This experience taught me that we all share so much in common, even if we are from different backgrounds or live on different sides of the world. Lastly, the benefit camp we held in Rikuzentakata was especially meaningful and eye opening for me. Witnessing the resilience of this community after the tragedy of the 2011 tsunami gave me hope and reinforced the importance of working together to rebuild.

Although being a camp counselor was not always easy, I am grateful for all of the challenges which improved my leadership and communication skills greatly. It was a truly unforgettable experience filled with personal growth, cultural exchange, and remarkable people.