

SENIOR CAMP COUNSELOR REFLECTIONS SUMMER 2018

Kiana

I often find myself looking back at the countless unforgettable memories I made at SCOA because it was genuinely one of the best summers I've ever had. I didn't know I could ever experience being so extremely happy until I met all of these kids and played with them, making them laugh. Being with and playing with the kids everyday was hardly work, and in reality, I just got to be a kid again. It made me so happy to be able to put a smile on these kids' faces, and in the end, I hope that I was able to bring as much joy to them as they had brought into my life. Although we didn't speak the same language and I only got to spend a few days with the kids each session, I will remember some of them for the rest of my life. Some of my favorite memories of camp are the times that I could just make small talk to my team to learn more about their lives & Japanese culture. I treasure every moment that I experienced at SCOA, from the team names to the water balloon tosses to the campfire songs to the close, lifelong friendships that I made with all of the other senior and junior counselors. I learned more about Japan and its wonderful culture from all the kids than I ever could have by just traveling and sightseeing like a normal tourist. Being a senior counselor with SCOA was a life changing experience that I don't think I could ever come close to experiencing with any other program.

Fischer

SCOA gave me the opportunity to learn about Japan more deeply than I think I could have otherwise. Through my daily interactions with the kids I could learn about their interests, what they wanted to do when they were older, what they liked the most about Japan, and much more. It gave me a much clearer picture of Japan than a normal trip ever could, and I had an excellent time doing it. The camp moves quickly while still giving enough time to share an experience with these kids. I remember many times forgetting that I was in another country at all- it just felt like I was playing with my little brothers and sisters back home. It reminded me that the distance between our countries and our cultural differences don't mean much when you look at people on the individual level, and this was the meaning of the cultural exchange that SCOA provides for its participants.

Breanna

My time in Japan was one for the books. I enjoyed learning a new culture through the immersive experience of being a senior counselor. It was my first-time leaving America, which was terrifying and exciting all at the same time. Meeting the kids and working with the wonderful, energetic counselors really sold the experience for me. We all had so much fun and it was my first summer camp experience as well. So, I was able to learn a lot of new campfire songs and play all the sports I love. Trying to explain how to do soccer drills to kids that did not speak my same language was a challenge. It allowed me to get a different perspective on a game I know how to play and gain the knowledge to embrace the language barrier. At the end of the day we all learned something new and had fun doing it.

One of the really special moments for me was when my first group of campers I had, wrote me a letter. They worked really hard to write it in English for me to read. It also had some Japanese words visibly translated so I could learn their language. It was so heartfelt and sweet I was so happy. It was amazing how they worked so hard to make a connection with me after only knowing me for a few days. It was a perfect representation of how friendly everyone was in Japan. The letter now sits on my desk in a frame along with other pictures from camp.

Japan is a wonderful country overall and the kids all loved joining us. I highly recommend everyone to be a part of this experience or one similar, especially if it is out of your comfort zone. It was an opportunity of a lifetime to learn a new culture, embrace language barriers, and meet so many new people. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity at an experience of a lifetime.

Caitlin

Having the experience of being a SCOA counselor was one of the best experiences of my life. At first, I was very apprehensive about taking on this challenge because it was an extreme step out of my comfort zone. However, I am so glad I decided to try something new because the memories made, and friendships formed are something I will always remember. The people I met this past summer were what made this trip so memorable. The Japanese and Senior counselors were all great, and definitely helped in easing my nerves about all the new things that were happening. We were all very close and that just made the overall experience even better. I still keep in touch with them!

Working with the campers was also amazing. They were so kind and adorable, I miss all the kids I had on my teams. Although communication with them was limited, we were able to bond over small things like our favorite movies or making lanyards in the activity room. I am in the process of learning Japanese for my major and exchanging words and phrases in English and Japanese not only helped me but my campers as well. I also miss singing camp fire songs and doing the talent show with my team, which is something I definitely wasn't expecting.

Finally, the benefit camp in Rikuzentakata was a humbling experience. We heard so many stories from people who were devastated by the tsunami in 2011 and saw how their city has rebuilt itself. It was inspiring to see the members of the community and meet Mama. After my experiences this summer, I decided that I want to return to Japan after I graduate and teach English!

Lauren

I had the best experience of my life this past summer. SCOA gave me an opportunity to embrace my love for teaching and creating. At first, I was hesitant to push boundaries because of the language barrier, but after the first few sessions, I realized that I had nothing to worry about! With each session, I made the cheer dances and words more and more difficult, but each time I was blown away by the effort and talent put forth! I also feel like the incorporation of Zumba was a great ice breaker for the kids to trust that I would do my very best to teach and make their final performance a success!

GLEE was a completely different challenge that I absolutely LOVED! I was always worried that they may not like what I chose, but once I got the ball rolling, their enthusiasm and comfort increased exponentially! Both sessions, I loved watching how proud they were of themselves for memorizing songs in English and singing, dancing, and acting in front of all the younger campers who look up to them!

This experience was a blessing in my life. I've always wanted to travel to Japan and see the parts that most people don't have the opportunity to see. It was a complete exchange of culture and I was surrounded by some of the most polite and loving kids I'd ever met! This experience made me more interested in understanding Asian culture, and since then, I've redirected my study courses to delve deeper into this newfound passion of mine!

Tariq

In all honesty, when I accepted J.R. and Keiko's invitation to become a SCOA counselor, I had absolutely no idea what I was thinking at the time and was pretty nervous actually. The reason for this is because my whole life I struggled with communication skills due to me being shy, awkward, etc. I didn't even know whether or not I really liked spending time with kids. Nonetheless, I had no idea what to expect from SCOA. However, this program has changed my life for the better. I learned many things about myself in only six weeks, including my realization of how much I love kids.

The factors that changed my entire perspective of SCOA was, of course, the kids. It was most definitely a

challenge for me to get comfortable with the kids, but when you break that barrier, you begin to take notice of their value. You spend so much time with them having fun, playing games, doing skits, it puts you into a very happy and innocent place as an adult. They remind you of your own self when you were little. Also, as you develop a strong connection with the kids, it drives you to give them the best experience possible as you give them a taste of American culture. Thus, no matter who you are I would recommend SCOA to anyone who is looking to attain a valuable experience in their summer. The amazing qualities of this program cannot be fully understood by my words alone, you must go out there and immerse yourself into an entirely different and beautiful culture, and country.

Don't get me wrong, J.R. will make you work from early dawn to dusk, but it's hard to even notice once you get accustomed to the program and the amazing kids that attend SCOA. It's kind of funny because I even forgot that I had a family of my own back in the States. That's the charm of this program. It becomes a new home away from home and welcomes you with life-long connections to be made with the kids, counselors, J.R., Keiko, and other amazing people along the way.

Jadon

SCOA is an amazing program that really allowed me step completely out of my comfort zone and experience Japanese culture. I truly enjoyed all the people I interacted with and I feel like I grew more this year than the previous year. In terms of highlights, I loved the Rikuzentakata benefit camp, the kids, and getting to know the senior and junior counselors. It was definitely difficult switching from a facilitator role to a managerial role. Being a head counselor is no joke; however, seeing the camp from the directors' standpoint gave me a completely different outlook on SCOA, and made me appreciate it more. And I definitely feel putting more responsibility on me made the camp run smoother because the counselors could go through me. Overall, SCOA had its ups and downs, but I loved my experience. Knowing what to expect really helped. SCOA is the perfect example of something being easier the second time you do it.

Andrew

Sometimes the greatest experiences occur when you embark on an adventure not knowing what to expect. For me, SCOA was the perfect example of such an experience. For the few months after getting accepted to be a senior counselor for SCOA, I anxiously awaited my departure date, knowing that I would spend the next month-and-a-half with people who I had never met in a country whose culture and language was foreign to me as well. Our training days were a little rough, with everyone orienting themselves with each other and with Japan standard time. But, on the night before our first group of campers arrived, we had a counselor bonding session, and from then began what would be one of the most amazing five-week periods of my entire life.

Working as a SCOA counselor was exhausting at times. We had to be actively involved and interacting with our campers for 14 hours a day. But, as we progressed through the weeks and sessions, I really began to understand the importance of our work in Japan. This importance revolves around SCOA's mission statement – "Cross the Bridge, Expand your Horizons." Both the counselors and campers had crossed a proverbial bridge, and while one could say on a superficial level that this bridge was simply the ocean separating Japan and the United States, to us, the bridge symbolized much more. This bridge represented our willingness to shed our predisposed beliefs about each other and overcome certain perspectives in which we envisioned ourselves. On a worldwide level, as Japan is viewed as homogenous and at times slightly isolated, America is viewed as the home of the arrogant, inconsiderate, and uncaring. While these stereotypes do hold true in some cases, each of us, camper and counselor, had made the concerted effort to test these labels and categories. And, it did not take long for us to discover that although there is a vast physical distance between our two countries, we have much more in common than that which divides us. A lot of this is demonstrated through the unmistakable bond that forms between the camper and counselor who do not speak the same language yet come away from a three or

four-day camp with an appreciation and admiration of each other's similarities and differences. Through meeting each other and getting to understand one another on a personal level, we truly expanded our horizons.

As an American counselor at SCOA, I believed that my role was two-fold. The first was to help the campers learn English and sports through our mutual love of sports, camp activities, and having fun, and share with them a different perception of the United States than what they may see and hear in the media. The second was to serve as an emissary to my friends back in the United States, sharing with them my memories and takeaways of a Japanese people and culture which I had truly come to respect, admire, and certainly not take for granted.

When JR asked me on the last day if there was anything about the program that I would change, the answer I gave him, "not really", was incredibly sincere. I loved all the sports we played and activities we did, the opportunity to read to the campers before bed, the casualness of the end of session BBQ, the teaching and performing of the team chants and skits, the chances to bond with my fellow counselors, the two lovely venues (Kiyosato and Moe) which hosted us, and of course JR's and Keiko's guidance throughout the summer. And of course, I can't forget the raw emotion felt when holding the benefit camp at Rikuzentakata. Hearing from Mama and coming to understand the magnitude of our two-day camp there was nothing short of powerful. As athletes and students at prestigious Division I colleges, we often take for granted how much we have and can be hesitant to give back. But in Rikuzentakata, the opportunity to give back to people, some of whom had lost everything, had never felt so good.

Throughout my time in Japan, I remember telling my fellow counselors that I knew I would miss this experience when our time at SCOA had concluded. But as I write this, in the comfort of my college dorm, the memories of this past summer flash through my mind, and I truly feel like a part of me is missing. Yet, I can't help but appreciate the smile forming on the ends of my mouth, as I take solace in the fact that the memories and friendships formed during my time in SCOA will last a lifetime. Sometimes when you cross a bridge, you never go back over to the other side. I take pride in knowing that I helped eight sessions of SCOA campers cross their own bridge and expand their horizons. But I am also unable to return the way I came. As I now stand on a new side of my bridge, I admire my new horizons, one replete with a newfound appreciation, respect, and high-regard of a people and culture I was so fortunate to spend time with this summer.

Tiffany

I have never felt like there has been an event or choice I've made that's drastically changed my life in a positive way... until I became a counselor at SCOA. Traveling to Japan, a country I never even dreamed that I would be able to go to, was a once in a lifetime experience. It was 5 of my life I will never forget and will cherish forever. As a SCOA counselor, I was able to travel all over Japan and experience the different cultural aspects of the country. The language, food, customs, and of course the people changed my entire outlook on life. Japan is a place you just cannot put into words. There is so much beauty within the country and its people that I was able to experience, even being there for such a short time. At SCOA, we worked all day long with groups of Japanese children and swapped our cultures with them. As counselors, we taught the children American sports, spoke English with them day and night, and brought out our "inner kid" by reliving our summer camp days of playing games, singing camp songs, and performing skits. The Japanese campers reminded us of the pure joy that still exists in the world when you win a game of capture the flag, taught us as much Japanese as we could remember, and gave us purpose in being mentors for them. I'll never forget teaching a group of Japanese girls the "Roll Call Song" and having them perform it in front of every single person we ran into. And I'll always remember watching the kids fall over from laughing so hard at the boy counselors dancing to "Daddy Shark". The campers of SCOA were simply amazing and I couldn't have had more fun with them.

Not only did the Japanese campers and people I met along the way change my life, but more drastically the other American counselors did. Spending 5 weeks straight with the same 14 people in a

foreign country, solidifies a relationship that you can't get anywhere else. Every counselor in our group was different from another with different life experiences and outlooks on everything. We became best friends quickly and usually once a week we still talk. I'm so thankful SCOA brought me some of the best people I've ever met I highly recommend becoming a counselor with SCOA because honestly it was one of the best programs I have ever been a part of!