

Study Abroad

A FRESNO PAIR FINDS THEMSELVES WHILE WANDERING JAPAN

Written by Douglas Hoagland

FRESNO STATE STUDENTS MARCO ARIAS AND JIMMY DURAN SKIPPED STONES ACROSS A LAKE WITH SNOW-CAPPED MT. FUJI TOWERING IN THE DISTANCE. THE WINTER AIR CHILLED THEM AS THEIR REMARKABLE TIME STUDYING IN JAPAN NEARED AN END.

In that peaceful moment, they talked with fellow international students about why they'd come to Japan. Before the day was over, snow would blanket their lakeside retreat during another memorable experience made possible through Fresno State.

For Arias, spending five months in Japan realized a dream he'd nurtured since middle school. In almost poetic terms, he described the feeling when his plane touched down there. "It was like my soul was already there, waiting for my body to arrive," he says.

For Duran, the time in Japan proved an opportunity to stretch beyond the comfortable world he'd always known in Fresno. "I definitely found my voice so I could meet new people," he says.

Both Arias and Duran received financial assistance through the Shields Family



Grant to pay for tuition while attending Kwansei Gakuin University in Nishinomiya, a city of 480,000. In 2019, the Shields Family established a \$500,000 endowment with Fresno State Study Abroad to help low-income students study internationally. Both Arias, an information systems major, and Duran, a graphic design major, also got travel grants from the university.

The late John Shields was a professor emeritus of agriculture economics, and Elizabeth Shields taught in the Craig School of Business. The Shields grant helps Fresno State students pay for pro-

gram fees to study in 23 countries under the umbrella of the University Studies Abroad Consortium (USAC).

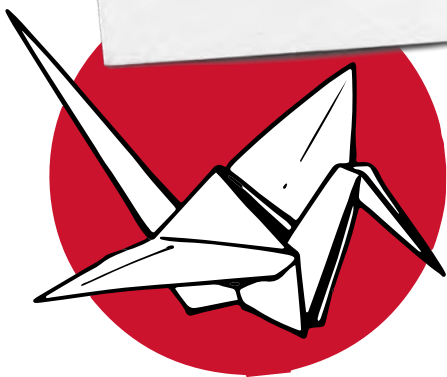
“The Shields grant was the only reason I was able to go to Japan,” Duran says. “I’m thankful for it.”

Arias says he's grateful to the Shields family for “not only allowing me to experience a beautiful moment in my life but for also giving me the opportunity to learn and grow greatly from this experience that I will forever cherish.” »

ARIAS HAD TO LEARN TO WALK AGAIN.



Arias with Host Family in Japan



Arias and Duran both followed a family tradition in studying abroad. Arias' brother and Duran's sister both took that opportunity, and they encouraged their younger siblings to do the same.

Arias needed little prompting. Incredibly, his journey to Japan began with his parents before he was born. As young people in Mexico during the 1980s, Arias' mother and father watched the Japanese anime series *Dragon Ball Z* dubbed in Spanish. They passed their love of the series to Arias, who watched it as a child in Mexico before his family came to the United States.

Then at age 8, living in a Fresno County farming community, Arias sat on a green-striped couch in his family's small apartment mesmerized by the series, now in English. As Arias' love of anime grew, an interest in Japan took root. He eventually began watching YouTube videos about Japan, fascinated with a society so different from the western world. "I gained respect for the culture," Arias says.

In middle school, he decided he wanted to one day travel to Japan though his family's modest means might have made that impossible. But Arias' mother listened to her son's hopes and counseled him.

“The world is yours. You can achieve anything with hard work and dedication.”

But in middle school, it didn't feel like the world belonged to him – he was diagnosed with leukemia. And his health challenges weren't over. In high school, he contracted a form of meningitis, which left him in a coma for two weeks and took the vision from one eye. Paralysis was another complication, and Arias had to learn to walk again.

Through it all, he never lost his desire to see Japan. So when Arias finally arrived in Japan, it was a surreal experience. "I had no words," he says.

Rather than stay in a dormitory at Kwansei Gakuin University, he opted to stay with a Japanese family to get a close-up look at daily Japanese life. A husband and wife in their 70s were his hosts. They spoke little English, and Arias had taken only two semesters of Japanese at Fresno State. But they all managed, and affection grew between the older Japanese couple and the young American as he gained a deeper understanding of Japanese culture.

“The pace of life felt very laid back but moving with purpose,” Arias says. “This discipline is something I try to incorporate into my life.”

Arias sandwiched travel in Japan between his classes at the university. Among his destinations: Hiroshima, the first of two cities where the United States dropped an atomic bomb to end World War II. "It was really heavy on the soul to visit there," he says. "It's one thing to learn about it in high school and question whether or not it was right to drop the bomb. But it was completely different being there. It made me think: what are we as a human species doing to ourselves?"

Duran also traveled to Hiroshima. He shed tears while visiting a bombing museum and a peace garden, and the experience left him and other students with no words. "We went back to our hotel and sat with what we had experienced," Duran says. »



His interest in Japan also began by watching anime while growing up in the Fresno area. From that beginning, he developed a taste for Japanese food and an appreciation for Japanese art, with its focus on simplicity and strong connection to nature. “There were definitely several factors that culminated in me wanting to visit Japan,” he says.

One of those factors: a desire to experience a new environment where he could push himself personally. In his college years, Duran maintained the same friend group from high school.

“I never really branched out to new people. Going to Japan help me reach out to new people and new experiences.”

Those included spending a week in Tokyo, a cosmopolitan city of 14 million that showcases both modern and traditional Japan. Duran also snowboarded for the first time in his life on the northern island of Hokkaido, and he traveled to Onomichi, a port city known for its Temple Walk, a network of paths connecting 25 temples.

Duran made friends with both Japanese students and other international students visiting Japan. He stayed in contact with them, playing video games with friends from Canada, Malaysia, Singapore and the United Kingdom across international time zones.

Ironically, Duran and Arias didn’t know one another before going to Japan. They became friends and upon returning to Fresno State were “dumbfounded,” as Arias puts it. “We had all this experience with Japan, and we asked ourselves: what do we do with it?”

They answered that question by reaching out to Japanese exchange students attending the university. “We wanted to do something to help them experience America,” Arias says. Working through the Japanese Student Association at Fresno State, they organized trips to nearby national parks and attractions such as Six Flags Magic Mountain.

FOR DURAN, THAT ACT OF REACHING OUT WAS SOMETHING HE LEARNED TO DO STUDYING ABROAD.

“Being in Japan was an opportunity to grow. I definitely came out of my shell and pushed myself into new situations. I am so appreciative of Fresno State and the Shield’s family endowment for making this trip available to me.”

For Arias, his semester abroad was confirmation that he was right to go to Japan. “When my journey was coming to an end, I could not help but reflect about all the incredible and wonderful friendships, experiences, struggles, and learning moments that I was able to experience.” 🇯🇵

