

Dair J. Cruz

JASWDC Tanaka and Green Scholarship Essay

Hanami 花見

Growing up in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., it was a tradition of my mother and I to visit the Tidal Basin in the spring and see the Cherry Blossoms in full bloom. Seeing the banks of the Potomac River saturated in pastel pinks and whites, I knew from a young age that this time and place was something special. It was not until in High School where I learnt that the cherry blossoms were a gift from the Japanese Government preceding the time of both the World Wars. In the coming years, I will start to find that the cherry blossoms hold more significant meaning, history, and value than just an aesthetically pleasing landmark on the Potomac or on the Kandagawa.

After entering High School my mom started allowing me to take the Metro into Washington on my own. I remember that spring of the 9th grade taking the Red Line to Metro Center and walking over to the Tidal Basin to see the cherry blossoms at night for the very first time. That night I found myself in a completely different world, where the Potomac glistened with pearl petals of the cherry blossoms and light from the moon and the surrounding avenues. It was a completely foreign experience from what I grew up with during the day.

The summer of 2018, I interned with JASWDC and NAJAS, two non-profit organizations in Washington that focused on the cultural, educational, and business connections between the United States and Japan. It was there where I continued to learn the significance of the cherry blossoms and learnt that there was an entire festival dedicated to this special time of year - The Sakura Matsuri. In celebration of the blooming of the sakura trees, JASWDC hosts the largest one-day celebration of Japanese culture in the Western Hemisphere.

All of these experiences have been building up to my new life in Tokyo, Japan. Arriving in March to my new residence in Bunkyo, Tokyo, at a traditional Japanese male-dormitory in the Camellia Hills, I was wide-eyed and ready to take it all in. This is where I had my first introduction to the tradition of Hanami - the act of admiring the fleeting beauty of the sakura trees. My dormitory's campus was scattered with flowering sakura and plum trees. Down the hill from Wakejuku laid the banks of the Kandagawa which were lined with cherry blossoms as far as the eye can see. Dozens of foreigners and local Tokyo residents flocked these streets with friends and families for nights on end. Some would even choose to take their lunch breaks in the park along the

Kanagawa with their coworkers. At first I was slightly taken aback by learning this tradition because I thought I had already developed a concrete understanding of what these trees are and meant. Little did I know there was an entire culture surrounding these trees and that it is centuries old. Much older than the United States has been a country and then some. Learning about Hanami has opened my eyes because I began to see how limited my conception of time, history, life was before coming to Japan. Come to find out that Japan is a very old civilization. Furthermore, I began to understand how much more there was to learn about any given subject even as mundane as a certain species of trees.

My journey with the sakura trees has now taken on a metaphorical role in my life. Even when you think you understood it all, there is always more you can learn and experience from the world. This kind of philosophy now holds a greater truth in my approach to my academic and soon to be career path. I am now more grateful for having pursued an interdisciplinary education at the undergraduate level and having decided to live and study abroad in Asia.

I sit here on the rooftop of my dorm, overlooking the now flush green sakura trees of Kanagawa and the skyline of Shinjuku, reflecting on how valuable my semester in Tokyo has been. Even Though it will take me a couple more years of study to become fluent in Japanese, through language, I will continue my connection to the rich traditions of Japan and love for the warmth of the Japanese people.