

## Essay by Kaitlin Skurnak

I grew up going to Mitsuwa every Saturday for the Children's Eisa practices, going to the New Years Parties, Picnics, and Obon festivals, and when I was younger, I just did it because it was expected of me, but as I have grown older, I have come to love the family that is the Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai. I loved running around with my Obachan at the picnics trying to sell raffle tickets and helping my aunt and cousin run the games with all the little kids. I loved joining the Tankō Bushi Circle and laughing with everyone when we messed up. My Obachan taught me the origin of the dance and I hope to continue to learn more and more about Okinawan traditions. I want to absorb all of the dances and songs and stories like a sponge in order to keep them alive and pass them down. I have already learned some interesting things by following the Kenjinkai's Facebook page and reading about traditions, but I want to continue to delve deeper. One of my main goals is to learn Japanese because I feel that there is a bit of a generational divide, and so much is being lost to our younger generation. I want to be able to speak to some of the older members of the Kenjinkai in their native tongue, and get to know them better and learn more about their stories and traditions.

When I think of Okinawan culture, a lot of things come to mind, but the number one thing that comes to mind is the overwhelming feeling of caring for others with no expectation of anything in return. I think of making sure that everyone is taken care of. I think of my Obachan, who wakes up early in the morning whenever she knows she is going to see me, just to make me banana pancakes, because she knows how much I love them. I think of a story my Auntie Paula told me, that when she went to a funeral for someone in the Kenjinkai, the funeral director said that he had never seen so much food in all of his years working there, which just goes to show how caring and compassionate everyone in the community is.

I am going to the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, to study Systems Engineering and Design, with a specific focus on Human-Centered Design, or designing things to be user friendly. I already am very fascinated by Japanese design in general, because they are definitely far more advanced than we are in terms of user-friendliness, and I hope to be able to study abroad in Japan to further study Japanese design principles. However, that is not the main connection of my future goals to Okinawan culture. As I mentioned before, to me, Okinawan culture means making sure everyone is taken care of, and for me, that means designing things to be usable for everyone. The main focus in my studies will be designing things to be more user friendly and accessible for people with disabilities because a lot of things are currently designed in such a way that excludes them from being able to use them.