

As I sit down to write this essay, my mind is filled with excitement and anticipation. I am eager to share my aspirations for the future and how the award of this scholarship would help me contribute to the Uchinanchu community. Ever since I was little, I have had a distinct memory of being surrounded by Okinawan culture. From dancing at Navy Pier in kindergarten to working countless hours to prepare for our first Uchinanchu Taikai, the Okinawa Kenjinkai gave me a place to feel a strong sense of community and a deep appreciation for Japanese culture and the people who continue to spread it in America.

Through the years, I began to notice that people in the Kenjinkai seemed to have contagious laughter and genuine happiness. No matter how tired I am, no matter how bad my day has been, I would always leave the Kenjinkai event feeling good about the day's accomplishments and about myself. Over the summer, I visited Okinawa and the experience put it all into perspective. Okinawa, unlike many parts of the world, had an overwhelming sense of relaxation. Time seemed to move slower, and the residents seemed to be in no rush whatsoever. This ability to take a moment and slow down the daily tasks seemed so simple yet seemed to have such a major effect on people's happiness. People in Okinawa loved to talk and always had a moment to ask questions with genuine curiosity. I believe that the Kenjinkai is a bridge connecting the people living far from their motherland and the culture and happy nature of Okinawa.

The scholarship will not only take some financial burden off my parents, but it will also allow me to escape the world I know and expand my knowledge and further my education. The Kenjinkai has given me a place, a role, a community, and most importantly, a place to feel happy and excited. I believe that it is my responsibility and honor to give back to the community by bringing in my experience and knowledge I would surely gain in college back to Chicago. Although I am attending University far away, I am planning to join something like a Kenjinkai to stay connected to Japan and share the rich culture.

My whole family is deeply engaged with the Okinawa Kenjinkai, and it has influenced my life immensely. But I did not even dream that the Kenjinkai would one day potentially help fund my college education. This community will forever have a special place in my heart, and it is a place I will always return to. No matter how far away I move or how many months I don't come back to Chicago, I strongly believe that I would naturally end up back at the basement of St. Mathews, surrounded by laughter and culture like no time has passed. I am excited to start a new chapter of my life and leave the life I know to start again somewhere far away. But I know when I'm back in Chicago, I'll always have a community to call home.