

2021 Scholarship Winner – Hina Kadono Essay

I am excited to study pharmaceutical sciences in college and commit my future to the research and development of medications to better many lives. I became interested in this field because I loved my chemistry classes in high school and from my personal experience with health issues. Along with specializing in a field I am greatly interested in, I hope to grow as a well-rounded young adult who can take leadership in the next generation of the Uchinanchu community.

Even though my origins are not rooted in Okinawa, I have grown to identify myself with the Okinawan culture and people. I am a Japanese-American, with parents from Osaka, who knew very little about Okinawa at first. My involvement with the Chicago Okinawa Kenjinaki started from a single phone call asking if I wanted to perform the lion dance with my father at the coming new year's party. I was never the type to jump into something so quickly, but this opportunity felt different. My heart filled with excitement as I responded yes to the offer: this was one of the greatest decisions I have made in my short life.

I put on my red, frilly lion legs and held on to my father's back. I could see the beams of light pouring through the fur of the lion like stars spread across the night sky. I gripped the tail with my right hand, breathing a life of its own. I looked up at my father's back, larger than I remembered, and concentrated on aligning my breathing with his. We moved to the beat of the music. We jumped. We rolled. We breathed in. We breathed out. We were in complete unison, manifesting the form of the Shishi. When the music stopped and we lifted the lion's coat, the wave of excitement from the audience hit me. I could hear clapping, I could hear cheering, and of course, I could hear finger whistling. Everyone was moving together, enjoying each other, and joining through the heart. Like a great and powerful Shishi, the crowd was breathing together. Through the many performances the Chicago Okinawa Kenjinkai held, I have grown to appreciate the Okinawan culture, but I have also learned about the responsibility of being a part of the community. Through my Shishi dances with my father, I discovered that I am capable of moving people's hearts. I came to understand that it is not just the dances and traditional culture we must pass on, but also the precious bonds between each person and the community itself.

I may be away for four years, or even more. But I am certain that I will come back to this community. Even when we could not meet to practice because of COVID, it provided me the comfort of a home in my heart. Being a part of the Uchinanchu community and performing the Shishi gave me confidence and a sense of certainty of my success in the future. After I am better educated and gained more real-world experience, I want to return to the community and give back to the next generation of youth what it provided me with. I want to take initiative and be a part of the leading forces to pass on the beautiful traditions of Okinawa and build on the strong community.