

Junior High School and High School

Highest Award

“Mensore Okinawa”

10th Grade, Mirai High School by Maho Takamine

"Mensore! (Welcome!)"

Few years ago, I was greeted with these words when I came back to Okinawa, my place of birth.

I grew up in foreign countries Australia and New Zealand through my childhood, living in an area that was crowded with tourists all year round as the tourism industry is very prosperous. Through interactions with locals and tourists, it was an exciting and funny place that there were new discoveries and encounters every day. My friends could not bear to watch me feel great resistance to having to leave such a familiar city, and said; “Don’t worry I think you’ll love Okinawa when you get used to it”. I asked her how she knew about Okinawa and she answered me in a happy tone, “It was sightseeing”. It was the first time for me to know that Okinawa is famous and a popular tourist destination. As I asked further, it was funny that there was a common point among Australia, New Zealand and Okinawa. It is that fact that their tourism is supported by natural environment, food culture and unique traditions. When I realized that my doubts and fears were gone and felt a sense of closeness towards Okinawa and started to wonder what kind of interesting place it could be.

In the plane, I recalled my friend who talks about Okinawa happily, and imagine "What kind of place will it be?" feeling very excited.

The first scene I saw in Okinawa.

Blue sea. Blue sky. Rich nature. They were totally different from what I have seen before.

“Oh my god. It’s so beautiful!!”

These words were spoken by the foreigner next to me unintentionally and made me nod, and I did not speak Japanese at the time. Seeing my reaction, my parents and I decided to live in Nago, a place full of nature. I can spend luxurious times in the sea every day, while my house and school are just on the doorstep from the sea. I feel grateful about that.

In the days living a full life, I found the greatest charm of Okinawa is “Uchinanchu” (Okinawans). The reality is that in multi-racial countries like Australia and New Zealand where I lived, it was a lie to say if there is no discrimination at all.

However, Okinawan people here accepted me with warmth, even though I knew nothing about the local culture and language, and they told me a lot of things spending time.

Not just being kind to me, I often see that they treat tourists kindly no matter where they come from. In fact, when I got lost during my visit from abroad, or when I wanted to take a photo but I did not speak the language, they asked me actively if I needed help and they talked to me happily.

I think "The heart of Yui Maru(To help each other)" of Okinawa people is an important key that leads to the development of tourism in Okinawa. It is because more and more tourists consider Okinawan as a charm of Okinawa. The tourists will happily come to Okinawa once again as a repeater.

"The heart of Yui Maru" is passed to the next generation, while the next generation is going to convey to the next just like a relay. There is a bright future of tourism in Okinawa.

On the other hand, right in front of us is the military base problem, territorial issues, and environmental issues, and we do not know what to do in reality. Sadly, one of those is that the sea of Nago that I love so much and is going to be reclaimed.

Of course, I dislike my memorable place being lost. Nevertheless, I do not think it is a good idea to further reclaim the beautiful sea of Okinawa. The Earth shares the grace equally, and Okinawa has got the best thing. Instead of damaging it with our own hands, why don't we consider protecting it?

It is a place where you and I live. It is "Everyone's Okinawa".

"What can I do?"

Ladies and Gentlemen, let's think together. I was working at school arranging cleaning the beach and the area. Also, my grandparents invited the students on school trip to their home to stay overnight, working in the area to hold activities to convey the charm of Okinawa. These activities are popular among students; and the circle continues to spread every year. I have also actively participated in community activities to clean up the beach and surrounding areas. As a high school student now, I volunteer as a translator for foreign tourists for language volunteering activities.

Why is this small island, Okinawa loved by so many people? I have made my conclusion through a variety of my experiences here.

There is a charm that makes you feel the connection between heart to heart. It is a place of absolute enjoyment for every tourist unconditionally here.

I love Okinawa so much. It is the turn for our generation to make Okinawa better. The theme this time is "Tourism of Okinawa in the Future". It is a theme that we create from our heart. Let us appeal the Okinawa that we make to Japan, as well as the other parts of the world.

The words that welcomed me a few years ago.

Next time, I will say it with my smile.

"Mensore"