

**Two Cities, One Sky – A Conversation Across Horizons**  
**Clay Bakhoun, 2025 Adult Leader of Torrance Youth Delegation**



**Please tell us about yourself.**

Please allow me to introduce myself! My Name is Clay Bakhoun, I am the 2025 Adult Leader for the Torrance Sister City Association. I was both born and raised in Torrance all my life, truly I think it is one of the nicest places there is. I am 26 years of age, and currently work as an IT technician for a local Primary & Secondary school in my hometown. This is my second time in Japan, but my first time visiting Kashiwa. I have been fascinated by Japanese culture since I was introduced to it at a very young age. Similarly Japanese food is extremely popular in Torrance, and has been a comfort food for me ever since I was introduced to it. During my free time I enjoy studying design, architecture, videography, animation, and photography. It's been an absolute dream to see how different Japan's cities look compared to America's. I feel so honored to be a part of such a wonderful experience! I cannot thank KIRA or the TSCA enough for how important and impactful an exchange this is for both the Kashiwa and Torrance delegates.

**What made you apply to be an adult leader?**

I have had a personal belief ever since I was young that we, as people, are called to work on something that will leave the Earth better than how we found it. It is for precisely that reason that I applied to be an adult leader. I cannot imagine a better way to spend time than to bridge an entire Ocean's distance than by building bonds with people that will last forever. The time we spent in Kashiwa was too short, but it already feels as if it's home. Watching these delegates interact with one another- well I can honestly say I'm not worried at all about the future of KIRA or the TSCA. I think with unforgettable experiences such as these, our two groups won't think of themselves as just individual ambassadors of a nation, but rather a group of friends. In a way, they represent exactly what we set out to do- unite countries, to bridge gaps from culture, distance, and language. Watching them bond has been a genuinely beautiful thing, to witness cultural divides literally melting away between the next generation, it's heartwarming. It's exactly the kind of thing I wanted to be a part of, feeling the world get friendlier with every laugh and smile that comes beaming off everyone involved. I'm just happy that I get to see it with my own eyes. Being included in a program this special was too irresistible to me, and everything has been better than I could have ever imagined.

### **Have you been involved in Torrance Sister City Association (TSCA) activities?**

Within the TSCA we have a few activities both myself and my delegates participate in! Aside from our orientations we have to go over the culture of Japan and everything to take note of before our trip- we have two big activities. The Bunka-sai festival held right next to Torrance city hall has events such as Taiko, Sado, Koto, and even Ikebana to show off traditional aspects of Japan to our local community. The Bunka-sai festival is always a fantastic time, it is a weekend celebration with lots of festival food, music, performances and more. As much as I would like it to be just as good as the Kashiwa matsuri, it isn't a fair comparison. Instead we try to bring a little piece

of Kashiwa to Torrance to share with everyone else! After Bunka-sai, Torrance hosts a Cherry Blossom Festival. There the current delegation will try to spread the word about the TSCA and our sister city Kashiwa throughout the event, getting even more people interested in the coming years. Hopefully I'll get to help out with many more activities in the coming years, as I'm still one of the newest members!

**Is this your first time in Japan or Kashiwa? How do you feel about it?**

This is my second time in Japan, but rest assured this is much more exciting. The first time I had the opportunity to visit Japan was back in 2017, around the same age as my delegates. However, I wasn't visiting with the TSCA, I had gotten the opportunity to visit a family friend and to see the Sakura Bloom over spring break. While that was amazing, this trip has been much more personal.

This was a much more authentic, and honest way to live in Japan. I felt much more connected with the culture on a personal level. Not to mention, my host families who made me feel as though I am one of their own. How I feel about Japan has only improved. I was always interested in the traditional arts, architecture, and foods of Japan, but now- I'm even more obsessed. Where before I had felt as a tourist, I think coming to Kashiwa has made me feel as though I actually belong here. The city is so welcoming and everyone we'd met at every school, or every guide on each tour was so pleasant and kind that I am heartbroken that I have to leave at all. I can't say enough good things about Kashiwa. There was never a dull moment in all our time exploring, I could walk for hours taking photos of every block.

**What was the most memorable part of your trip to Kyoto/Hiroshima with your students?**

In order to fully understand, please allow me to explain something: California, and Torrance specifically gets about 2 weeks of rain a year. Many of our fields dry up and stay that way a majority of the year. Rain is so infrequent, that to us- it's practically a blessing. Rain is symbolic of washing away the troubles of

the present and serves as a reminder that greener pastures are always on the horizon.

One unforgettable moment in particular stands out to me from our time in Hiroshima and Kyoto. Early in the morning we reached the Atomic dome and learned about everything that had happened all those years ago, followed by the Peace Memorial Museum. Seeing everything that had happened very quickly sent a sickening chill down everyone's spine. I think most of us were horrified with what we came face-to-face with, it was a deeply moving experience. That dark cloud we felt followed us as we traveled from Hiroshima to Kyoto, eventually metastasizing into literal storm clouds overhead. Most people would consider it bad luck, but for us, it was exactly what we needed. Climbing up Fushimi Inari Taisha in a pleasant rain felt like a world out of time. The Torrance delegates quickly decided the climb was more enjoyable without the burden of rain protection, and opted to forgo it entirely. Choosing to feel the rain, letting the water wash away the melancholy. It had felt like a blessing, other tourists and visitors quickly decided they'd preferred to be out of the downpour, leaving only a few of us remaining. Surrounded in a Forrest of lush green, brilliant red Torii gates, and the sounds of nature. I have no words to describe it other than magical. I watched spirits rise in the group as if by a miracle, looking back it is one of the defining moments of our trip, and it's a memory I will hold in my heart forever.

### **How do you want your students to grow through this experience?**

There are many ways I want my students to grow through this trip. I have already seen them growing far beyond my expectations. I only wish I could say I had a bigger part in each member's development but the truth is- they did it all on their own. It has been such a privilege to watch them find their own footing and own voice throughout this experience. Three weeks is longer than most students that age will ever spend away from their families, especially in a separate country from them. Hearing the emotions come through during the sayonara banquet speeches, watching many of the families tear up and cry, that bond is something only they can forge.

When I initially came to this program as an adult leader, I was hoping to build leadership, respect, organization, and improvisational skills with all of them. There were many who were interested in every facet of Japanese culture, and through having all these opportunities I was hoping more than anything that they would be able to try everything that interested them. I wanted them to understand the safest methods of international travel, and most importantly I wanted to teach them how to prepare for a challenge unlike anything they've ever experienced. Very quickly I found myself learning from them instead how to actually enjoy something new, how to dive headfirst into a complete unknown and be ready and excited for whatever is next.

At first I was worried that I might have to become an overbearing parent for my delegates. However, I think about these students now, and I'm not worried anymore. In every capacity they have exceeded my expectations, I have watched them truly take this challenge head on and with grace they have perfected it. I am so proud of them all, I truly cannot wait to see what they decide to do next!