

# Counselor Messages 2014

## Meghan – USC

I had an incredible and one in a lifetime experience in Japan! I don't even think those few words can express how grateful and blessed I am to have had the opportunity to be a part of this year's SCOA summer camp. I walk away with a new found knowledge about what it truly means to give back. The kids and counselors I met through this summer camp have changed my life forever. They reminded me that something as simple as a smile can makes someone's day even better. As I look back on the my experience, if someone was to ask me if I would do it all over again, I would, without hesitation, say YES! I now have memories from this summer that will last me a lifetime.

## Marisa – Stanford

Because I found SCOA to be such a life changing experience, I would like to share a little of what I did in Japan. My time in Japan working as a camp counselor for SCOA spanned a little over a month, but I found that it went by at an incredibly fast pace. My days were filled by the excitement of Japanese campers, teaching them American sports, campfire songs, arts and crafts and skits. Not only were the campers delighted to learn all that we could teach, it was entertaining for them to watch us attempt to speak what little Japanese we knew. The smiles and endless energy of the campers drove me to give them my all each and every day. Being a role model for these children not only allowed me to discover and apply leadership skills, but it also allowed me to show my fun, child-like side that many people don't see.

With SCOA, we traveled through various parts of eastern Japan working 10 different camps. The change of scenery and engagement with different campers gave me an interesting and unique outlook on Japan and its culture. In particular, we had the special opportunity to visit Rikuzentakata, a city that was devastated by the tsunami. There, we put on a benefit camp for the children in order to give them a spark of light and happiness. I found this camp to be especially touching as we were able to put smiles on the faces and laughter in the throats of those who were fighting through so much hardship.

Not only did this summer experience allow me to interact with many people in Japan, I was also able to create bonds with my fellow counselors. Though we all came from different schools, played different eto create a family of more than just co-counselors. We all still reminisce about our Japan adventures, and I am especially thankful for the unforgettable bonds we created.

Being a counselor for SCOA is an incredible opportunity that I am glad I embraced with open arms. Although it is an especially rewarding experience, that payoff doesn't come without hours of hard work, long days of entertaining energy-filled kids and giving everything you have to the kids. This job is for those who are not scared of learning more about themselves, the country of Japan as a whole and how the smile of one child can change a life.

I hope that my story will encourage others to apply for SCOA so that they can make memories of their own and continue to change the lives of these Japanese campers.

## Tori – UC Davis

Being a camp counselor at SCOA has been the best experience I've ever had in my life. Not only was I able to travel to another country and experience a new culture, but also I was also able to work with awesome and unforgettable kids. Even when I was in a bad mood, once I saw the kids, my face would instantly light up and I got a sudden burst of energy because you can't help but to play with them.

At first, I did have doubt with going to a new country with no one that I knew, but I ended up making lifelong friends and experiencing an amazing country. When working with the other counselors for five weeks, you are able to create great relationships and we were able to learn a lot about each other. We still have a Facebook page where we keep in touch with each other three months after our trip!

Working with the kids was awesome, but this program also lets you experience different aspects of Japan. The last few days we were able explore Tokyo, shop, and even climb Mount Fuji! I still reflect back on this trip and constantly look at the beautiful and fun pictures I took with the other counselors. I had unforgettable experiences during my five weeks in Japan and I wouldn't change it for anything.



## **Ivana** – Stanford

SCOA provided me with the opportunity to work with some of the brightest and cutest campers and for that I am very thankful. As a counselor, I felt that the campers reminded me of what it meant to truly live in the moment and to never stop exploring. Spending most of my summer in Japan was an incredible experience alongside all the fellow counselors and staff collaborating to create the best camp experience for all campers. Japan's culture and people are extremely warm and welcoming making it a lovely place to visit. In the end, the campers' beaming smiles made each day worth it!

## **Michael** – UC Santa Barbara

SCOA was easily the best and most rewarding experience of my life. I could not be more thankful to have been given the opportunity to do such meaningful work in such a beautiful country like Japan. When I first got accepted to SCOA I was extremely nervous, as I had no previous camp counselor experience. How was I going to communicate with Japanese kids in order to create skits? How will I be able to make a lasting impression on a camper who can't understand almost every word that I say to them? All of these questions and more had been running in my mind weeks before arriving in Japan and all of those doubts went away after I met my fellow counselors as most of them were having the same feelings of anxiety and nervousness that I was. The training, support, and resources that JR and Keiko give you will help make the transition a lot smoother than what you would think.

The people that you meet at SCOA really end up being your second family. Sure there will be times of disagreement and frustration amongst counselors, that's normal when you work with people every day from 7 am to 10 pm for 5 weeks. Every once in a while tempers will flare but at the end of the day I think we all knew that we were a part of something much bigger than ourselves and that we cared about each other very deeply. I hope to keep in contact with all my fellow counselors for the rest of my life, and expect a few of them to even be at my wedding. I know it sounds crazy, but you really do share an indescribable bond with the people you meet in SCOA, that can't really be put into words unless you have been fortunate enough to be given the same opportunity.

As someone who had already been to Japan before, I was completely blown away by the places that I was able to see, due to the fact that most foreigners aren't fortunate enough to visit them such as Izu, Rikuzentakata, Kesennuma, and Kiyosato. Sure you may not be in big cities of Kyoto or Osaka but to see the countryside of Japan was something quite special of its own. Plus the 2 days you get in Tokyo after the program gives you that taste of city life in Japan before you have to leave.

SCOA gives you the opportunity to make an impact on the life of Japanese kids. As cheesy as it sounds we really do change lives so the work you do as a counselor on a day-to-day basis is very important. The benefit and leadership camp that we do in Rikuzentakata and Kesennuma was probably the most meaningful experience of my life. To put a smile on those campers' faces, especially after taking a tour and seeing firsthand the devastation that took place in Rikuzentakata was truly humbling.

Overall SCOA was the most exciting experience of my life but don't be mistaken, to be a counselor at SCOA it takes a lot of hard work, patience, and creativity. Not everyone can handle it but if you're confident in your abilities to work with kids and be a team player there is no better of an opportunity to visit another country as amazing as Japan and do meaningful work than SCOA.

## **Carsten** – Roger Williams University

Whenever I hear the acronym SCOA, it stirs up memories of a family. Because that is what my fellow counselors became. SCOA, at face value, is an opportunity to travel, work, and learn. Once you delve deeper into the fabric of the experience you realize that SCOA forces one to take time for introspection. JR and Keiko do extremely well bringing together a group of diverse, yet likeminded individual. Perhaps the most humbling and life changing experience was touring through the tsunami ravaged zones of the Iwate Province. The more you learn about others, the more you learn about yourself. JR and Keiko are great and their personalities balance out well. At SCOA you will work hard but emerge a better person for it.



# Counselor Messages 2013

## Kris—USC

"Even though we may not be able to fully understand each other, we are still able to connect to one another through our hearts." Those words were said at a charity camp by one of the sweetest girls who attended the camp. Working at the SCOA camps has left an everlasting imprint on my heart because every day while at SCOA, I would wake up to hundreds of Japanese children who wanted nothing more than for me to try and speak in their language so they could laugh at me. This camp helps you build on practical skills such as patience and communication because you have to be able to remain patient while working with everyone at the camp while also trying different ways to get your message across to your Japanese campers.

Throughout the camps you build a strong bond with your fellow counselors that truly help you when you are dead tired from all the children. Still to this day, I keep in constant contact with all the counselors I went on the SCOA trip with, I even met my girlfriend on the trip, who probably should have killed me for all the harassment I put her through. But I strongly recommend this trip to anyone who loves working with children and enjoys challenging themselves because this camp is nothing more than a pure challenge of how quick can you think on your feet. Regardless whether you are a junior counselor or head counselor, everybody has the same common goal of one, keeping JR off their back and also making sure they put the best possible camp for these children to enjoy. JR has an expectation of what he expects from his counselors and it is the counselor's job to not only achieve what he expects but also raise the bar to another level.

When I came back to America, I had no idea how to sum up everything I did this summer because I had so many highlights that ranged from climbing Mount Fuji, learning to speak completely broken Japanese or even being to get past the language barrier with my campers and still be able to connect with them on a personal level. My best advice I can recommend to anyone thinking about doing the SCOA camp is to apply and just take the leap of faith because it is worth it and you will love it. Also, do not be afraid to voice new ideas to JR, this is the best way to keep the camp new to returning campers.

Have Fun!

## Stephanie—UC Davis

The greatest experience I have ever had. At the start of each session, each counselor has a team of 4-5 kids and they come up with a team name, team chant, and create a team banner. Throughout camp there are various competitions in which each team has a chance to win a point and at the end of camp there is a team point champion. Competitions include water balloon toss, potato sack race, treasure hunt, pirates, limbo, cup stacking, soccer shootout, football throw, Frisbee throw, and talent show. Each team also creates a skit in English and every team member must say a phrase. On top of the competitions, there are many other group activities such as capture the flag, soccer, tunnel tag, thunder-dome, football, Frisbee, swimming, cheer/dance, friendship bracelets, handshakes, card games, board games, Ask the Americans, an American BBQ, campfire, campfire songs, and s'mores. All of these activities have the capability of bringing people who speak two completely different languages together to share and experience the fun. As head counselor, it was my duty to make announcements, organize and help create teams, direct games and activities, instruct soccer, maintain awareness of the needs of campers and counselors, communicate logistics to other counselors, manage the schedule, organize and prepare for activities, make sure everything is running on time, announce awards at the end of camp, and most importantly make sure all of the campers are safe and having a good time! On top of all of the organized activities, there were moments where we could jump into a game or activity that had absolutely no planning. There was no dull moment in this camp and it requires one to have and maintain a lot of energy and smiles for every session! It is not impossible to communicate with someone who doesn't speak English. It takes time, heart, and patience. Whenever I felt like I communicated effectively with the kids, I was filled with joy. Not only were many of the Japanese kids inspired to learn about our culture and language, I was equally inspired to learn theirs.

## **Aref**—UC Berkeley

I can honestly say that the 5 weeks I spent in Japan for SCOAs have been some of the most memorable of my life. When I first learned of my acceptance as a counselor I was excited, scared, ecstatic, and especially nervous about my ability to be a counselor in a country I had absolutely no connection to. When I landed in Tokyo and met the other counselors I was incredibly impressed by the quality of counselors that were additionally selected. Most importantly, I realized that most of my fears were shared by the other counselors, which allowed us to bond incredibly quickly. That bond has allowed us to stay great friends after returning to the United States.

Within the first week of camp I fell in love with Japan: the people, the food, the culture, and especially the children were everything I could have hoped for. I cannot describe how amazing this camp truly is from a counselor's point of view. Although everything is set up to give the kids a great experience, it commonly felt as though it was my parents that sent me to meet new friends, play sports, and have fun. Each of the three locations were equally beautiful and serene with staff that made you feel as though you were a part of the family. As the camp progressed, I stopped counting the number of days I had to work until the next break and started to lament the few days I had left to play tunnel tag and chant campfire songs. The experience culminated in the TOMODACHI camp which proved to be incredibly introspective as we toured tsunami devastated areas, spoke to those displaced by the storm, and ultimately worked with elementary students from those areas. The camp holds a special place in my heart as I have never met such resilient people. As we left our final camp, campers began to cry and chase our bus out the driveway. For whatever things will happen in the future, I will never forget my time as a member of SCOAs

## **Sasha**—UC Berkeley

As I reflect on my time in Japan last summer some 5 months later I am still so grateful for such an amazing, and rewarding opportunity. Never have I worked with such excited, engaged and enthusiastic campers. It was so fun not only helping the campers learn English and sports but also just hanging out and playing games and sports we both enjoyed. Despite the language barrier I made connections and relationships with the campers as we had fun teaching each other about our different cultures. It was so amazing watching the many shy campers come out of their shells over the course of camp and act crazy and goofy with their silly American counselors. Not only did we just have fun with the campers but we also worked as role models. Watching the campers work hard in sports practice each day and improve so that they can one day succeed in sports like their counselors is an experience I will never forget.

Equally amazing about my experience in Japan was the lasting relationships I made with the other counselors. It was so fun sharing such an amazing experience with other like-minded college students. I am so grateful for the experience JR and Keiko allowed for me. Not only did I get to experience the bridging of Japanese and American cultures but I also made amazing friends that I still keep in touch with today. By no means was my trip to Japan a relaxing vacation but it was an experience in which I learned just as much about Japan and the culture but also myself as I grew immensely as an individual throughout my trip.

## **Rachel**—Stanford

SCOAs is just an amazing opportunity for people who love working with kids and traveling. Between the dodge ball games, our awesome group of counselors, Japanese lessons from 1st graders, reading bedtime stories and our climb up Mt. Fuji, everything came together to make this trip a truly incredible month.

## **Eric**—UCLA

Take me back to Japan! Japan will always have a special place in my heart because of all the campers, counselors, and staff members that made my experience an unforgettable one. To start off, I love children and being able to interact, teach , and laugh with my campers, every day at SCOAs was full of energy and non-stop fun every day. Simply watching my campers learn about American culture through sports and camp songs was a new and unique experience for me. I remember almost a year ago I was asking questions about this unique experience in Japan and looking back it was one of the best experiences of my summer. SCOAs can be demanding and some days you do get tired, but as you hear the campers running up and down the hallway at 5am and waking you up, you know why you are there- for the campers. Spending a month with absolutely talented and phenomenal counselor group from great universities from across the U.S was unique and amazing. Even though the program has ended our group of



counselors still keeps in contact with one another.

This program fosters friendships and relationships with our campers, but helps create bonds and friendships amongst the counselors and staff members that last a lifetime. SCOA goes outside the expectations of a typical sports camp and does as much as possible to help those who really need it. For instance, the benefit camp in TOMODACHI really touched my heart because I was interacting and learning from campers who were directly affected by the destruction of the tsunami couple of years ago. Overall, SCOA has had a very positive impact on me and SCOA is with me every day because I still wear all the friendship bracelets my campers made me, which remind me of the smiles of my campers. I hope that one day I will return to the island of group showers, big spiders, and amazing people. Thank You SCOA for a unique and unforgettable experience.

### **Nijah—UCLA**

This experience changed my life and it can change your life too if you open your mind to the possibility that a single trip can surpass all your expectations. SCOA gave me an opportunity to see a part of the world I have never seen before. Japan is a great country with tons of character and the best way to discover that was through the children. It was great being around and getting to know the kids over the four weeks I was at SCOA.

My experience was challenging like when I was trying to understand the kids and the language, but in the end, I walked away with some very valuable life lessons and a passion for Japan! I recommend that anyone who wants to learn about a new culture and to positively affect children's lives apply for SCOA.

I traveled to a few islands of Japan. We had 6 camps all together. So I met hundreds of kids who I had to translate conversations with that did not speak the same language as me, which was a challenge but was an experience that I will never forget.

I am so grateful for my experience in Japan and it really was an opportunity of a lifetime. Japan is an amazing country and this program allowed me to see so many different parts of the island. I experienced everything from the chaos of the Tokyo train system, to the serenity of the scenery in Kyosato, to the beautiful people that I have come across, while in Japan. I came to Japan with curiosity, adventurous, nervousness, and oblivious. Then left Japan, with courage, open minded, well rounded and determined. Made so many great friends. Thank you to SCOA for this experience!

### **Makotz—University of British Columbia**

Even as a 3rd year returnee, SCOA never fails to impress me with great memories. Every year, we have a variety of campers but most of them go home anxious to tell their parents how much of a blast they had. Unlike many other camps, SCOA has a huge language barrier between the counselors and the campers. But because of the campers' curiosity and the counselors' enthusiasm, they work to overcome this barrier and even more, manages to ignite new interests in the campers to explore beyond their small world. At the same time, counselors have a lot to gain from SCOA as they are, for the first time, exposed to a situation where their lives are not the norm anymore and on top of that they have 60 kids running around all yelling in a foreign language unfamiliar to them. All in all, if I had to sum up the best part about SCOA is the joy that both counselors and campers have in knowing that they can communicate and understand one another whether it be broken English, hand gestures, or even sports. The fundamental act of conversing between them means more than "hello, my name is...", like I said it sparks new interests and gives campers a whole new perspective of the life across the Pacific and beyond.

### **Savannah—UCLA**

Being a part of Sports Camp of America was a once in a lifetime opportunity. You are given the chance to live in a foreign country for a whole month and work with hundreds of kids. These kids inspired me to travel and see more of the world. They are smart, fun, and interested in American culture. Each week a new set of kids would come in and I would teach them how to dance and cheer. The camp instructor really trusted my input, and I was given freedom to explore new ways of teaching. The language barrier makes things more challenging, but that's also what makes it more rewarding. It isn't easy, but it is life changing. When I look back at the experience I start smiling immediately. I think about the counselors I bonded with, and the moments I shared with the kids. One particular night has really stayed with me. I usually worked with little girls who often came into the camp very nervous and scared. I loved seeing how they progressed as time went on. Getting attached to the kids was one of the most difficult parts of the trip because eventually I would say goodbye.

We spent half of the time in Izu and the other half in Kiyosato. Izu was an industrial style camp, with a very kind



staff. Accommodations were wonderful and we all got our own room. The staff was kind and they would even make a special plate of food for me. Food was very rough at times, but that was also due to being a vegetarian and recently finding out I was allergic to gluten. The camp staff helped me out though and bought me oatmeal when they saw me struggling. They always tried to help us out. It was a very exhausting month. We would meet the kids at 7 a.m. for breakfast and we wouldn't return to our room till 9 p.m. They tried to give us breaks, but the only one we were guaranteed was a 2 hour break every other day. It was pretty rigorous, and a lot of the camp counselors got sick. I think this was a part of the trip that they will change. Kiyosato was unbelievable. It was a beautiful camp in the hills with all organic food. I was in heaven during this part of the trip. The only part of this camp that was difficult was the bugs. Mosquitos chewed me up and left me with some scars around my ankles. These are just minor things, because overall I would highly recommend doing the camp.

The most rewarding part of the camp was the last week and a half. We traveled to the tsunami disaster site to do a benefit camp, TOMODACHI. I can't put into words how much this camp changed me. These kids inspired me to be a more understanding person. They went through a horrible disaster, lost everything, yet they were the happiest kids I met throughout the whole month. They would giggle, laugh, and sob as we left them on the last day. They knew how to feel.

I wouldn't recommend this trip to everyone because it isn't an easy experience. If someone is looking to travel, work with kids, and put in a lot of work it is perfect. I loved the trip, but I also got lucky with the other cheer member from USC. We clicked and she helped me get through the exhausting days. If you want to escape LA, and sleep on a tatami mat for a month, do it. It was definitely a once in a lifetime opportunity that I will remember forever.

## **Forrest**–UC Berkeley

Being a SCoA counselor was just the experience I needed after graduating from college. I had just finished an intense academic 4-year period of my life and I wanted to do something exciting, while challenging. I had been a camp counselor at an American day camp for four summers, but SCoA was a whole new ball game. It was definitely no picnic: we all worked long days at a very high, enthusiastic pace. Since I could not speak the same language as kids during the day, I really began to appreciate just speaking English to other counselors during breaks.

Though I sometimes did feel pushed to my limits, there were a few things that I think made it possible for me to say after all of it, "I would've have done it again in heartbeat." Making great friendships with all of the fellow counselors there made all the activities, games and down-time fun, meaningful, and important. I know it sounds sort of stupid, but we'd even sometimes play some of the games meant for the kids just among us counselors.

Additionally, I felt the process of listening and feedback with JR and Keiko was really important. They both have a ton of experience under their belts, which was very useful at times, but they aren't perfect. It was important to listen, respect other's opinions, and then give yours. They were both very reasonable, kind, and understanding people that wanted what was best for the kids and the counselors.

Lastly, I really enjoyed the chance to get creative and ridiculous. Making this camp the type of camp I would want to go to as a kid was what made this so rewarding. Whether it was inventing a new game, saying a chant in a unique way, or even telling a child's story in different tone, everyone enjoyed it more.

In summary, I would say this is what I got out of it:

- · Rewarding cultural experience
- · Group of friends who I still keep in touch with
- · Memories of ridiculous things you cannot make up

There are few ways I think I could have spent my summer in any better way.

## **Alison**–USC

Being a SCoA counselor was hands down one of the most rewarding, challenging, and important experiences of my life. The counselors are brought to Japan to teach the kids about America and sports- but the reality is that we learn so, so much more from the kids we get to spend every day with. All at once I learned the differences between American and Japanese culture while seeing the many things we have in common. I grew so much as a person from being a part of SCoA and also met some of my best friends in the process. First and foremost, SCoA is fun, but being a SCoA counselor is also incredibly hard work and you will be exhausted mentally and physically by the time camp ends. However, if you are as lucky as the camp counselors were last summer, you'll emerge with lifelong friends, a fresh worldview, and memories you'll cherish forever.



## Alegra-USC

My SCOA experience was unlike anything that I would have ever expected from being a summer camp counselor. Because of SCOA, I had the opportunity to make lifelong friendships, touch the lives of kids, and I had my life put into a different perspective that made me realize how truly grateful and privileged I am to live in such a great country. Through SCOA, I was able to experience a culture that is rich with history and is full of love for their people – I would do it again.

As a SCOA camp counselor you learn how to work with kids of a different culture by learning their culture, while teaching them how to play American sports like Frisbee, football, soccer and maybe some running; teaching them English and learning some key words in Japanese all at the same time.

To say that going to Japan is a culture shock would be the understatement of the year, but, for me, Japan wasn't too hard to adjust to – I just had to ignore the giant genji – household, larger than life spider-like insects commonly found in Japan – I'm not a huge fan of bugs, but that didn't stop me from having the time of my young life.

Keiko and JR are some of the greatest people you will meet. As heads of the camp, they are so giving and caring to the kids as well as handling matters responsibly and professionally in regards to the company that they run together. In my opinion, they will continue to develop great camp counselors as well as continuing to create a great camp experience for the kids.

SCOA taught me so much, and provided me with an opportunity that I would have never imagined that I could experience. Being a camp counselor for SCOA was the adventure of a lifetime and it will forever be a trip that I will remember and cherish as long as I live.

