

My Uchideshi Experience

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My heart is full. I am deeply humbled and overflowing with gratitude. It is difficult to find words big enough to describe what this experience has meant to me.

To say this was a dream come true would be a lie. I never dreamed I would become an uchideshi in Japan. When Barbara sensei first reached out to me about the possibility, I was delighted and spent a great deal of time reading about the experiences of other uchideshi to prepare myself. Needless to say, I came to Japan ready for the worst.

It turned out to be nothing like that.

When I first arrived in Japan, I wasn't entirely sure what awaited me. I only knew I was stepping into a rare opportunity—one many hope for, but only a few are blessed to receive. From my very first day at Tokorozawa Dojo, I felt something special. I wasn't welcomed as a visitor, but as part of a family.

Training as an uchideshi has been an honor beyond measure. Practicing Aikido every day—sometimes three times a day—has been both demanding and deeply fulfilling. Every practice, every correction, every bow on the tatami reminded me why I fell in love with Aikido, and why I will continue to walk this path.

What I was not prepared for was the cold. I have never been so cold in my life. I now have a deep appreciation for heaters, warm socks, radiators, and heated blankets. I even got sick during my first week here, which was truly unfortunate. But even then, being on the mat and doing Aikido lifted my spirits immensely. I felt a little lonely during that time, but nothing a phone call home couldn't fix.

This experience gave me more than physical training. It gave me reflection. It gave me stillness. It gave me back a part of myself I had forgotten.

Back home, life moves quickly—children, work, responsibilities, always something needing attention. But here, in the rhythm of dojo life and the quiet moments between keiko, I remembered how to simply be Leah.

The Kobayashi dojos are a remarkable training ground. I had the privilege of practicing with people as young as eight and as old as eighty. Sharing the mat across generations made the cold mornings more bearable, knowing we were all in it together.

Soshihan's class always felt light and playful, and I love how he laughs even as he inflicts pain. Dojocho Hiroaki Sensei's Aikido is both beautiful and powerful—truly a sight to behold. I always found myself smiling face down on the mat, as he threw me with the ease of a feather. No matter how hard I tried to hold on.

I was also blessed with unexpected experiences, like practicing calligraphy with soshihan. He often reminded me to slow down, and I now understand that this lesson goes far beyond ink and paper. It is a lesson for training, for life, and for presence.

And then, there were the trains.

In the beginning, getting lost was stressful and overwhelming. I got lost so often it became expected. But with time, I figured it out. Traveling no longer feels intimidating. And if I take a wrong turn, I simply find my way back. That simple shift taught me trust, patience, and adaptability.

As my time here comes to an end, I look back with deep appreciation. I feel stronger in body, clearer in mind, and softer in heart. I feel renewed. I will miss you all—the keiko, the laughter, the shared meals, the small lessons, the big lessons, and the feeling of belonging. You have left an imprint on my life that I will carry forever.

Thank you to the Kobayashi family, and to every Sensei, Senpai, and fellow students who trained with me, guided me, supported me, or simply smiled when I needed encouragement. Thank you for your patience and understanding as I learned.

May God bless you and keep you.

I pray that we meet many more times as I continue on this path. I also pray that many more female Aikidoka from Kenya will stand where I have stood—because now I truly understand what an environment like this can awaken in someone.

May the bridge between Kobayashi Dojo and Kenya remain open for decades to come.

From the bottom of my heart—

Arigatou gozaimasu.