

Have you ever thought about where you really come from? Not just the country written on your passport, but the things that shape you “you”- your family, your language, your traditions, your culture.

Hola. Today I want to share a story, not just across borders, but across cultures, hearts, and understanding.

I was born and raised in Japan. My mother is Japanese, and my father is Mexican. But for most of my life, I didn’t think much about my Mexican side. I spoke only Japanese, ate Japanese food, and saw myself as just another Japanese student. Even my name – Maya Daniela – has always felt like something I didn’t really use.

Last summer, I visited my father’s hometown in Mexico by myself. I was excited, but also nervous- I didn’t speak Spanish, so I wasn’t sure how I would communicate. Even though I couldn’t speak their language, they welcomed me with open arms. They used gestures, simple English, and patience. Slowly, I learned a few words, not enough for deep conversations, but enough to connect. Then, something incredible happened. I found a karate dojo in the town-the same style I had practiced since I was a child in Japan. At first, I wasn’t sure if I could truly connect with the students. So, I was surprised when the students welcomed me with such excitement. For them, learning karate with someone from Japan was very special. When I showed them my kata, they followed along with bright, determined eyes. I encouraged them with “ ¡ Muy bien!” and their joyful smiles showed how much it meant to them. That was when it became clear to me. Karate spoke louder than words. I realized that my Japanese heritage, through karate, had connected me to my Mexican friends in a way I never expected. It wasn’t the nationality or the language. Karate was a connection that brought us together. That moment changed how I saw myself. I used to feel not fully Japanese, not fully Mexican. But now, I understand that’s not the case. I say I am 100% Japanese and 100 % Mexican. I don’t have to choose. I can fully accept both sides of me, and that makes me stronger. But more importantly, I learned something even bigger. Culture is not a wall. It’s a bridge.

I used to think language was the most important tool for connection. But in Mexico, I came to understand that actions, kindness, and shared experiences matter even more. Diversity isn’t a barrier. It brings us closer and helps us understand each other better. In Mexico, my karate friends didn’t see me as an outsider. They saw me as someone who shared their passion. My family didn’t worry about my imperfect Spanish. They cared that I was there, that I was with them.

Whenever you wonder where you really come from, remember this: your identity is not just your passport, but the connections you build, the kindness you share, and the bridges you create between hearts. So I want to ask you: What makes you who you are? What traditions shape your identity? What stories do you carry?

¡ Muchisimas gracias!

18 番 山田 眞矢

岐陽中学校

Building Bridges, Connecting Hearts