

My Chosen Whānau

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As I readied myself to become part of a journey to Aotearoa, it had been very clear to me that the Maori people honored their family tremendously, but what I hadn't known was their family surpassed the boundaries that were typically defined as parents and their children. Personally, family is deeply embedded into my culture as well as my own being. To me, the word held a great significance. Family were the people who loved, cared for, and protected me, however, I was blind to think that blood was the only family that could truly define me.

Hurriedly running through the Los Angeles International Airport, I found myself at my destination, looking at 10 unfamiliar faces of my SDC group around me. My eyes wandered back and forth, noticing the same feeling of nervousness drawing itself onto each of our expressions. We hesitated to speak to each other, trying to assimilate ourselves into this new experience. After all, we were all strangers before flying to Aotearoa.

"Kia Ora." We would soon become accustomed to the multi used Maori phrase that had first welcomed us into uncharted territory. Without hesitation, our Maori hosts opened the doors of their home to a group of unknown teenagers from North America, but their kindness didn't stop there.

We would later be invited into their **marae**—a tribal gathering house— which would invoke emotions within me that I hadn't known existed. They spoke gracefully in their native Maori tongue as they introduced us and those before us into their world. We had become a part of their **whānau**, family, and they treated us as such. I had found it unbelievable at first, but it had taught me a lesson I needed to discover. Beyond blood, there is a family that can be chosen, those who can understand you, and those who are equally as important.

Within the month, that is now seemingly too short, I had found a new place where I could belong. On one particular night, we had sat around a circle in the marae. We sat there comfortably, uncovering the stories we couldn't dare share with the people back home. Words we were scared to articulate, flowed freely from our mouths into the ears of those intently listening. We shared stories of grief, happiness and everything in between. A simple moment changed the course of our journey together. Our initial hesitation towards each other dissipated

and turned into an unbreakable trust.

A group of strangers had transformed into people who knew about the exterior and interior of one another. Our bubble was no longer one of uncertainties, but one of love and care. As we prepared to leave each other at the end of the journey, we reminisced about our summer abroad, of our summer together. In the world we had created amongst ourselves, the slight uplift of our lips on our faces that extended into our eyes and deep into our souls were always evident. Our smiles always full warmth and giddiness as if we were living in a reality that did not exist for others. When I'd look around the room, an invisible thread linked us altogether. **They were my *whānau*.**

