

# One Shovelful at a Time —Volunteering in Tohoku—

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The cold started at Shin-Hanamaki as I boarded the Kamaishi Line to Tono. Throughout this past March, the bitter cold, wind, and snow never left. But the kind hearts of volunteers, staff, friends, and survivors of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and subsequent tsunami kept me warm. Hiroko Suzuki, former Tono Furosato Village manager and now with the Tono Tourism Association (<http://www/tonojikan.jp>), greeted me at Tono Station with her usual gracious smile. After helping me settle in to the Tono Magokoro Net quarters, I was ready to begin work early next morning.

The cold was piercing that night. I slept two hours. And as it grew colder with each night, I wondered whether I would last the next three weeks. Yet I wanted to experience firsthand Tohoku's harsh winter, when freezing temperatures, combined with razor sharp winds and incessant snow and rain, prolonged the icy chill. Can we even begin to fathom the suffering of those who, numb from the unexpected explosiveness of the 3.11 monster earthquake and tsunami, faced such bone-cutting weather?

Why was I here? Tomomi Kaneko, a fellow volunteer from Fukushima, asked me this same question while on our way

to Otsuchi to work in the mud. My short response: Our past never leaves us. Born in Fukuoka, Kyushu, as Kenji Kimura, of my mother Misae Kimura and Irish-American father Tom Brannigan, I treasure my heritage. Soon after Japan's triple horror of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown, I quietly promised my recently departed mother to learn more about the tragedy and share this with others. In 2012, with invaluable help from Tokyo's East Japan Railway Culture Foundation manager, Kunio Aoki, his assistant, Mizuki Naito (now Abe), and Hiroko, I spent time in Tohoku learning from survivors, victim's families, and key persons involved in recovery. And now during my sabbatical, I wanted to work more closely in stricken areas and learn 'on the ground' from the people themselves.

Hiroko, Kunio, and Mizuki suggested that I work as a volunteer for Tono Magokoro Net (<http://tonomagokoro.net/english/>). They encouraged me every step of the way. Hiroko was my key contact in Tono, helping me in many supportive ways. Her generosity knows no bounds. Even now, she is storing my sleeping bag and boots for my return next year. Moreover, through the generous support of East Japan Railway Culture Foundation, I was able to travel and experience unforgettable encounters listening to and learning from those with whom I have had the privilege to meet. For all their steadfast assistance, guidance, and support, I remain forever grateful.

## Tono Magokoro Net

Immediately after the 3.11 Tono City was the lifeline for survivors. Citizens offered assistance in numerous ways, and Tono Mayor Toshiaki Honda wasted no time organizing disaster response groups and sending aid. Tono continues to be the home-base for recovery assistance to coastal communities. Kunio, Mizuki, and I had the privilege of meeting with Mayor Honda. With his charismatic presence, firsthand knowledge of the Sanriku coastal



A memorial site overlooks a still-flattened Otsuchi

(Author)

topography, and former role as the region's Deputy of Disaster Preparedness, he was the right leader at the right time.

Tono Magokoro Net is a unique volunteer network joining together, in unprecedented fashion, five Tono citizen groups and Tono's Social Welfare Councils, groups that had worked independently immediately after 3.11. Facing the inconceivable magnitude of destruction, they joined hands to remove debris and provide food, water, and clothes to tsunami victims, officially establishing Tono Magokoro Net on March 28th, 2011. From humble origins in a hallway at Tono Sogo Fukushi Center, to a temporary prefabricated building in Tono Joka Center, and to its current site on the outskirts of Tono, it has grown in membership, with a branch office in Kanda, Tokyo. Magokoro Net aids countless survivors who still live in *kasetsu jutaku* temporary shelters, rebuilding their communities and creating jobs for them, particularly on farms in Otsuchi

Magokoro Net's skilled leadership comprises Chairman Kazuhiko Tada and Vice-chairmen Ryoichi Usuzawa, Yusuke Kotani, and Keiko Maekawa. I spoke with Ryoichi Usuzawa after he shared his experiences as a tsunami victim. Humble and genuine, he still lives in temporary housing in Otsuchi. Magokoro Net's success also rests upon Directors Koji Kise, Masahiro Sasaki, Hideki Matsunaga, Toshihiro Kuramoto, and Yoshiya Anbe; Auditors Ryoji Arata and Hiroshi Sasaki; Counsels Eietsu Arakawa and Fumio Terui; and Managers Kanako Hosokawa, Chikara Oyama, Fumiko Yanagi, Yukie Sasaki, Chihiro Yamamoto, Chie Kotani, and Makoto Yanagisawa\*1.

We volunteers worked closely with site leaders, the charismatic Keita Inoue, who probably knows more about the disaster than a roomful of books, the quiet, confident Tetsuya Arakawa who sometimes treated us to pizza during our lunch break, and Akira Kamatsu, always with a smile and helping hand.

Although no 2 days were the same, we kept a strict schedule. I slipped out of my sleeping bag at 05:30 with an ice-cold wash to revive the senses. After breakfast, we assembled at 08:00 for *rajo taiso* limbering-up exercises; I now know the words, music, and routine. At 08:20, we drove 40 minutes down winding roads in vans to coastal Kamaishi, Otsuchi, and/or Rikuzentakata. We worked until noon, followed by lunch until 13:00 often at shelter shops owned and run by survivors and victims' families in dire



Our Magokoro Net headquarters in Tono

(Author)

need of business. At one restaurant in Rikuzentakata, the owner, who lost some family to the tsunami, shared slides of the town's colorful history, its beauty as a seaside resort, and the destruction that ravaged the town with waves reaching heights of 19 m. After 3 years, much of Rikuzentakata still remains flattened and barren.

We worked again from 13:00 to 15:00. Upon returning to our Tono base, we worked together, without exception, cleaning the facility. After laboring in disaster sites where death still echoes, cleaning was also a way of reinforcing solidarity and regaining equilibrium, normality, and order. At our 17:00 group meeting, leaders offered insights and introduced new arrivals. Volunteers also shared personal perspectives from their experience in ways that clearly demonstrated kind hearts filled with empathy. After our meeting, we had dinner and free time until lights out at 22:00.

Working regularly at *kasetsu jutaku*, each day we gained a further taste of what life was like for survivors living here, their agonizing disconnectedness from family, friends, and neighbors. There was a shadow world, situated in Limbo literally in-between their lost home and utter loss.

These shelters were grouped in various sized clusters. At one cluster in Otsuchi where we were preparing a community area for occupants, older women routinely met for tea, each others' company, and conversation. One older man, having no use for tea and conversation, needed to be physically useful and would often accompany us as we moved benches, stoves, cleaned rooms, and swept porches. He occasionally helped me with lighter tasks, and would always seek us out whenever we worked there. According to psychiatrist Dr Makiko Okuyama, noted for her work on children and disaster trauma, women are more

likely than men to become each other's support, explaining the higher post-disaster suicide rate among men. I met her later in Tokyo at the National Center for Child Health and Development, with the caring guidance and assistance of Naoko Kakee, who directs its Health Policy and Bioethics Division.

After a hard overnight snowfall, we would spend the day shoveling heavy snow at *kasetsu* in Otsuchi and Kamaishi. Freezing overnight temperatures often created chunks of ice on walkways, prohibiting occupants from venturing outdoors. For residents, many of them elderly, one fall could easily break a limb and be fatal with hospitals still struggling to regain staff and facilities. So we chopped up the ice, shoveled, and hauled away the snow.

## Small Giant Acts

Villagers would show gratitude and a certain kinship with us through small deeds. The small act, the commonly unrecognized and taken-for-granted gesture, speaks volumes. These small acts, seemingly insignificant, are the minor chords that make all the difference in this symphony. In the long run, we define our lives by our small acts.

After a demanding day shoveling snow in Kamaishi, the Kobayashis, in their 80s, invited us into their home resting on a hilly road far enough from the coast to barely escape the onrushing wave. Mrs. Kobayashi was so full of energy, serving, without stop, tea, rice crackers, and snacks to the nine of us squeezed into their tiny living room. Her husband sat in his armchair with a giant smile, a rugby match on their small TV, as we shared conversation and company. They lost family, friends, and neighbors. They did not have much. But what they did have, they shared with us –strangers– and they later ambled down the road to bid us farewell.

On another occasion, after lunch at a shelter eatery with English Literature student Ayaka Nishii, her friend, also named Ayaka who studies Law, and Maki Furukawa, we browsed at a shelter shop before heading back to our windy work site at Rikuzentakata. We were working there to prepare for the upcoming 3-day disaster memorial. I remember Ayaka Nishii's remark at lunch concerning the toughest challenge for survivors–'healing their torn hearts.' While in the shop, someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was the elderly man I spotted earlier in a chair when we entered. He offered me a cup of freshly brewed coffee he just purchased. He then bought boxes of candy and gave them to the ladies. He had lost family and home. He had little. But he wore a giant heart and gave what little he had.

After the memorial, we returned to Rikuzentakata to clean up. There, Ayumi Kakuhari led local volunteers. She barely escaped the wave as it swallowed her home and neighbors, but she lost her sister. After leading us through

morning exercises, Ayumi immediately rushed up to me and embraced me with a giant hug, her round face smiling. With penetrating dark eyes, she asked me to come back to her town when I return. I assured her that I would. She later gave me a precious note of gratitude, a plea to work together to build a future, and a prayer that my U.S. hometown 'does not become like this town'.

Mikiko Sugawara embodies the extraordinary in the ordinary. Soon after the tsunami ravaged her town, she coordinated the care of over 900 survivors, many elderly and disabled. A humble, striking, hard-working mother fully committed to caring for her small family, her inner strength shines. As she managed to serve tea to 15 of us in packed into her small Rikuzentakata shelter, I was struck by her grace as she boiled water and passed out cups. She shared with us her family's struggle to survive and how friends and neighbors were swept away by the waters. Though she carried much loss within her, her actions smiled and exuded her warm heart.

## Volunteer Glimpses

To volunteer is to take a detour from routine. In their own ways, volunteers with whom I worked showed remarkable empathy in their unassuming gift of themselves. I remain honored to have worked alongside them and to now know them as friends. They include Takuro Sakimoto, Yutaka Uenishi, Takuya, Yoko Kanda, Masashi Tanoue, Kyoko Akasaka, Yumiko Murakami, Nobu Kobayashi, Norito Yuasa, Sayoko Kawabata, and from my native Kyushu, Kyoko Matsuzono and Ayaka Wada, and many others\*2. They and the kind Magokoro Net staff do not think of themselves as special nor doing anything heroic. They were simply doing what had to be done, without fanfare.

Tomomi Kaneko, mentioned earlier, who studies civil engineering at Fukushima National College of Technology, talked eagerly about her work with Rwandan refugees and their children living in Fukushima. She personally shared with me how she and her friends now live in constant anxiety about having children due to radiation risks. She fears her uncertain future.

This is the same fear that Minamisoma City Mayor Katsunobu Sakurai described when the East Japan Railways Culture Foundation team Kunio, Mizuki, Noriko Yamamoto, and I met with him following my volunteer stint. We afterwards visited the 'nuclear ghost town' of Odaka. Fukushima prefecture citizens not only face the invisible threat of radiation poisoning, but also what some call the '4th disaster'– unfounded rumors and stigma attached to this threat. Mayor Sakurai challenged us to realize the continuing disaster and the suffering of displaced survivors in shelters, and elderly who fear dying there. In the spirit of

his samurai ancestors, and like Mayor Honda, the Mayor shows unflinching commitment to rebuild his community.

Not all volunteers were university students. Katsunori Kumagaya, probably in his mid-forties, supervises Chiba's Ichihara-City Sports Association. A former physical therapy trainer, he is a 'repeater', returning to Magokoro Net each year. He and I shoveled snow together at a good pace. Through him, I learned how sports can be a special source of community pride and recovery in the aftermath of disaster. Kamaishi has its beloved professional rugby team, the Sea Waves, and shelter shops sell Sea Waves pins, t-shirts, and photos. Indeed, Kamaishi is vying as the site for the 2019 Rugby World Cup. But with its sorely fractured infrastructure, it will be difficult to compete with the other bidder, Osaka.

And then there is 28-year-old Yosaku (Saku) Oshiro from Okinawa, another repeater. He studied management at Tokyo's Hosei University and has an enduring interest in helping the downtrodden. For Saku, volunteering is no detour from the routine. Serving others may be his life work. Programme Coordinator for the Association for Aid and Relief, Japan (AAR Japan), an International Non-Government Organization (INGO) that offers long-term assistance to the vulnerable throughout the world, he is presently in Yangon, Myanmar, managing a vocational training center for persons with disabilities, all physically handicapped. They include polio victims and, with Myanmar's high number of landmines, many landmine victims.

Disasters remind us that we humans are not the measure of all things. That title goes to the unbending rhythm of Nature, its cycle of birth, death, and all that lies in-between. Yet when all seems lost, what lies within us, our inner spirit and hope, carries the day and is the measure of our moral grit. There is a Spanish saying, *La esperanza muere al ultimo*, 'Hope dies last'.

Volunteers, staff, and survivors have shown me the unbreakable resilience of the human spirit. After shoveling snow and mud, there is simply no going back to my former version of what's real. Each shovelful is another inch to carry another's burden. Each shovelful makes up the wheelbarrow, and every wheelbarrow builds the mountain. Each inch makes all the difference. ■



JR East Haranomachi Station Master Yoshiei Hotta and former station master Motoyuki Takada, with Kenji, and EJR Cultural Foundation's Noriko Yamamoto and Kunio Aoki at the deserted Odaoka Station (Author)

## Notes

- \*1 My kind thanks to Magokoro Net's Public Affairs Manager, Makoto Yanagisawa, for providing details.
- \*2 My heartfelt thanks to my other teachers whom I met after volunteering, including Tomoaki Tsuchida, Ichiro Kobayashi, Yukiko Fujimoto, Katsunori Kawano, Naoko Hayashi, Toshimi Kushida, Hiroto Komukai, Toshihiro and Yuko Kuramoto, and dear Yukiko Fujimoto.



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