

Not My Fault: An extraordinary voyage continues

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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Unfathomable catastrophe nearly six years ago. More than 80% of their city destroyed and they have all lost someone close – a parent, grandparent, brother or sister, teacher... The list goes on and on. Twelve young survivors of that tragedy arrived in Crescent City a week ago. They were 9, 10 or 11 when the tsunami struck Rikuzentakata and other towns and cities along the Tohoku coast of Northeastern Honshu, Japan. They have spent their entire adolescence in a post-tsunami world – living in temporary housing, shuttled to temporary school sites hours away. Every day is a reminder of what was lost.

Their visit to Del Norte County is the result of a series of improbable events that defies credibility.

1) The small boat Kamome, that belonged to Takata High School, did not sink. Ripped away on March 11, 2011, it bobbed in the ocean for more than two years, hitching a ride on the giant circulation gyre of the Northern Pacific with barely more than a scratch.

2) She landed on one of the gentlest beaches on California's North Coast, in clear site of HWY 101 and within the city limits of Crescent City, the most tsunami-vulnerable community on the west coast of the US.

3) The characters for Takata High School handwritten on the side of the boat survived the voyage. When a colleague translated them, I remembered that I had seen the damaged High School on a post-tsunami field survey six weeks after the tsunami. I had been following the Rikuzentakata Facebook page to monitor recovery efforts. So I posted a link to photos of the recovered boat on their page.

4) It would have been very easy to ignore the post by a foreigner about a bit of tsunami debris. But the person monitoring Rikuzentakata FB posts was Amya Miller, an American born and raised in Japan who had volunteered to help tsunami-damaged communities interface with foreign media and aid organizations. Amya recognized the significance of the boat and understood its potential symbolic importance. We struck up an email conversation that has led to mutual respect and collaboration. Be careful who you meet on the internet – in this case it began something neither of us could have imagined.

5) A group of Del Norte High students decided it would be a good school project to clean the boat, raise funds and return it to Japan. They were a diverse group – including freshmen and seniors, two cheerleaders, some college bound and others strictly on a vocational path. They knew little about Japan at the time and nothing about Rikuzentakata. But all were intrigued by Kamome and her journey.

And then businesses large and small pitched in to help – from the local Del Norte County Recology to the giant Nippon Yusen Kaisha, one of the oldest and largest shipping companies in the world. Diplomats from the Japanese Consulate in San Francisco and the US Embassy in Japan cut through paper work. On October 21, 2013, 943 days after the boat was ripped away by the tsunami, it arrived back in Rikuzentakata.

And then the exchanges began. The original Del Norte High group were invited to Japan in February 2014. A group of Takata HS students traveled to Crescent City in 2015 and a Sister School agreement was forged between the two schools. Another cohort of Del Norte HS students visited Japan in 2016 and along the way a children's book, a Facebook video, the keynote five-year commemoration talk at the Tokyo National Museum, and international media attention.

Which brings me back to this week and the laughing, giggling, enthusiastic Japanese and American students, needing only a little help from translation Apps to share their favorite pop singers, computer games and other interests. I applaud the Del Norte County community who have embraced this exchange and opened their homes and hearts. When asked for host family volunteers, so many stepped forward that most of the Japanese students switched houses mid-trip so that everyone could participate. And so many supporters – the Tomodachi initiative, the US – Japan Council, Rotary clubs and individuals on both sides of the Pacific. This month I will be presenting a check for \$3000 to the Del Norte Unified School District, proceeds from the sale of the Kamome children's book to support the next group of student travelers to Japan.

And now a new chapter is about to open. Four Crescent City/Del Norte County officials will be visiting Rikuzentakata next month to begin establishing an official Sister City relationship. There is nothing new about Sister Cities –social or legal agreements between civic entities to promote cultural and commercial ties. 43 California cities currently have sister city relationships with Japan, including the Eureka –Kamisu tie.

The Crescent City – Rikuzentakata link will be something quite new, a Sister City relationship forged by a small boat and the friendship between two high schools. And its purpose will also be new – exchanging lessons between two tsunami-vulnerable communities so that both will be stronger in the future.

Kudos to Kamome, the little boat that could and did survive. And a big thank you to everyone who continues to keep “The Boat of Hope” afloat and paddle its way to the next chapter. More about Kamome at www.humboldt.edu/kamome and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/kamomeboat.

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