

Times Standard

Not My Fault: Celebrating ten years of tsunami connections across the Pacific

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Kamome tile mural by Del Norte artist Harley Munger was unveiled on Friday at the Crescent City Kamome Festival. The mural is installed at Beachfront Park and is based in part on Amy Uyeki's illustrations from "The Extraordinary Voyage of Kamome."

Del Norte County hosted an inaugural Kamome Festival on Friday. Kamome is the small boat that was swept into the Pacific Ocean in the March 2011 tsunami. For more than two years the boat drifted upside down in the ocean. Caught in the giant clockwise circulation known as the Northern Pacific Gyre, Kamome inched slowly to the east towards North America. The little boat ran aground at Crescent Beach on the evening of April 7, 2013.

Before the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami, Kamome (seagull in Japanese) was a working boat well known to fisherman working in Hirota Bay near the city of Rikuzentakata in

Japan's Iwate Prefecture. Kamome belonged to Takata High School and was used by students in the school's Marine Science program to learn the basics of working in harbors and ports. Spotting the 20-foot boat on the Bay was a sign to stay clear as students might be in the water learning to scuba dive.

Kamome was not being used on Friday afternoon March 11, 2011. She was safely secured on the tarmac of the Hirota harbor when the magnitude 9.1 earthquake struck offshore of the northeast coast of Japan's most populous island of Honshu. A series of tsunami surges arrived along the coast soon after, ravaging coastal cities and towns and port facilities. The Government estimated that five million tons of debris – buildings, cars, boats, and port infrastructure – were swept into the ocean by the tsunami.

Much of this debris washed back onto the land or sank close to the coast but about a third of it was swept far offshore to be caught in the Northern Pacific Gyre. Gyres in the northern hemisphere slowly clockwise---rotating system, driven by winds, temperature variations and the Coriolis effect. The currents are fastest at the surface, moving at speed of a slow jogger.

Kamome was just one of thousands of boats swept away by the tsunami. The first to be spotted near the North American coast was a derelict fishing vessel in Canadian waters on March 23, 2012. For the next five years, boats and other debris was sited in Alaska, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, and California. The last confirmed tsunami boat landed in December 2020 on an island south of Yokohama. It had made nearly a complete round trip on the Gyre.

With so much tsunami debris and many similar boats beaching, why celebrate Kamome? Because of what happened next. The first step to confirm if debris came from the tsunami is to identify where it came from. With boats, the registration stickers provide an easy way to do this. But Kamome had another identifying mark – handwritten characters painted on the side. My friend Kumi Watnabe-Schock who works in the Cal Poly Humboldt Library quickly deciphered the characters to read “Takata High School.”

Takata High School was in Rikuzentakata and I had been there six weeks after the earthquake on a post-tsunami field investigation. I even had a photograph of the school. Rikuzentakata had a Facebook page, so I posted photos of the boat on the site. That was the nudge that quickly became a cascade.

Amya Miller, an American born in Japan, was monitoring foreign posts on the Rikuzentakata Facebook page, and quickly responded. When she learned that high school students from Del Norte High School wanted to return the boat, she facilitated the effort. She went a step further and found funding through the TOMODACHI Initiative for six Del Norte High students to visit Rikuzentakata in 2014, forging the first link that would eventually lead to this week's Festival.

The following year, a group of Takata High Students traveled to Crescent City. Exchanges continued in 2015 and 2016, paving the way for connecting civic leaders and government officials. Rikuzentakata and Crescent City officially became Sister Cities in 2018. Crescent City's Sea Quake Brewery created a Kamome Ale and Rumiano Cheese produced Kamome Dry Jack. The Kamome story resonated with so many people on both sides of the Pacific. NBC Sports picked up the story and featured it in their coverage of the 2021 Summer Olympic Games.

Friday's Kamome festival featured activities for all ages. In the morning, students from Del Norte County schools and family members participated in origami, Kyoto fan folding, Kanji writing and card making. They put emergency go bags together and were given copies of "The Extraordinary Voyage of Kamome" book.

Evening activities included traditional Japanese drumming by the Humboldt Taiko group, airing the NBC Kamome film from the Olympics and the unveiling of Del Norte artist Harley Munger's tile Kamome mural. The mural stands in Beachfront Park in front of the playground off of Front Street. An identical version of the mural has been given to Rikuzentakata. A delegation of officials and civic leaders from both Rikuzentakata and Del Norte County attended.

The Kamome story resonates with everyone who hears it. Earthquakes and tsunamis are usually associated with lurid headlines and scenes of terrible loss. The Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami produced horrific loss. Rikuzentakata was one of the hardest hit cities and almost completely destroyed. I still have chilling memories of Rikuzentakata when I visited six weeks after the tsunami – the naked foundations of so many homes, the few surviving taller buildings with water marks on third and fourth floors, the debris everywhere.

But Kamome shows that small acts of kindness can make a difference even when loss is so great. The looks of joy on the faces of Takata High students when reunited with Kamome will melt even the frostiest of dispositions. The obvious connection between the American and Japanese High School students show that language is no barrier to friendship, especially with a translating App on your phone.

Children led the way. Del Norte and Takata High students quickly embraced one another, and it took little time for them to realize that they were far more alike than different. It took longer for adults to make similar connections, but I am thrilled to see that government officials and the business communities are fully on board.

What pleases me most is that it is a new generation of civic leaders has taken the lead with the Kamome Festival. And they are just as enthusiastic as their predecessors, telling me that next year's festival will be even bigger and better. The Kamome voyage continues to astound.

You can find much more about Kamome at <https://kamome.humboldt.edu/>.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. The opinions expressed are hers and not the Times-Standard's. All Not My Fault columns are archived online at <https://kamome.humboldt.edu/taxonomy/term/5> and may be reused for educational purposes. Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu for questions and comments about this column, or to request a free copy of the North Coast preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground."