

## **Not My Fault: A child's experience of a great earthquake and tsunami**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard  
Posted May 2, 2018

Last week I got an email from my friend and HSU colleague Kumi Watanabe-Shock. She had just met a young man in the English as a Second Language Program who had lived in Rikuzentakata, Japan in March 2011. My ears immediately pricked. Rikuzentakata was where Kamome the tsunami boat was from and only last month, Crescent City and Rikuzentakata had formalized a Sister City relationship. Could she arrange for me to meet him? And of course she did and here is his story.

Kotaro Kawakubo spent his 5th and 6th grade years in Rikuzentakata. His childhood was unusual by Japanese standards where most people rarely move. Kotaro lived in 11 different places growing up as his father worked with different regional governments. He had been living in Rikuzentakata for 10 months before the earthquake. On the day of the tsunami, his mother and younger brother were at home and his father was working in an inland city about 50 miles away.

On the afternoon of Friday, March 11 he was in his gym class and about to play soccer. He was inside a small storage room getting the chalk to mark the field when the earthquake occurred. He thought someone in his class was giving him a hard time by shaking the small building. When he went outside to tell them to stop, he saw everyone crouched on the field.

The earthquake lasted a very long time – at least two minutes. After the earthquake, it was very chaotic. Many parents drove to the school to pick their children up and the traffic jam was terrible. His mother did not – she trusted the school's emergency plans to keep the students safe. His teachers had them immediately evacuate - walking north towards the evacuation area. The main road was too crowded with cars so they walked on a side road. It was very cold and they were all dressed in their soccer clothes - shorts, jersey and light jackets.

Kotaro remembers having practiced the evacuation twice before – once each semester. It took them about 15 minutes of walking to get to the hills. He said they were very casual about it at first but as they got higher they could see the tsunami surges hitting the coast and everyone became very serious. They spent most of that

night huddled together on the hillside trying to stay warm. They wanted to start a fire but a teacher was concerned that gas lines might have been severed and flames would be hazardous.

They had no food or water, but phones did work and Kotaro remembers watching a movie on one of the teacher's phones. The phone also gave them notification that the tsunami warning had been lifted so early Saturday morning they walked back to the school. There was debris everywhere and the air smelled of salt water. The schoolyard had become an emergency triage center and teachers told them not to look at the injured people. The upper floors of the school had not been flooded but there was concern that the structure may have been damaged.

They did have emergency supplies at the school - packaged food and water and blankets. But it hadn't been stored properly and the blankets were wet and not usable. They were able to eat/drink the food but there wasn't enough. He doesn't remember being hungry though - they were all in shock. He spent Saturday night at the school. The next morning (Sunday), the weather was better and in the morning he and a friend left the school and headed to his home. He didn't remember any system at the school for keeping track of the kids.

Kotaro's home was in a high area outside of the tsunami inundation zone. Not only were his mother and younger brother there, but many survivors had gathered there as well. He mainly remembers his mother cooking for many people, there not being enough food and being very tired. He also remembers how the smell changed – smelling like normal sea water at first and becoming more fetid as the days passed. He didn't want to leave the house. After the first week, the number of people there began to decrease. The army arrived the day after the tsunami but was busy assessing damage and providing logistical assistance for the response teams and weren't able to assist survivors for the first six days. After that, they did distribute food and water.

Kotaro's family was able to drive back to Tokyo about two weeks after the earthquake. It took them two days to make what was normally a 7-hour drive. The family never returned to their house. Two years later, he did revisit Rikuzentakata - just to see it again and was struck by the emptiness and the desolation.

The most important part of Kotaro's story is that the school, the teachers and the students knew what to do. Rikuzentakata was part of a regional effort to train

children in tsunami tendenko, a belief that everyone, including young children, can take actions to protect themselves. The training paid off for Kotaro and in Iwate prefecture where far fewer children were among the casualties than in other coastal areas that did not have school training. This is a lesson that we should learn as well.

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