

Tilly Smith, Kamome and having “the talk” with your children

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

Posted: March 23, 2016

As parents, we want to protect our children from unpleasant or difficult situations. For a lot of us, this includes talking about natural disasters. It is easy to think such a conversation could worry or frighten them – especially if it is a topic that makes us uncomfortable. Psychologists believe that children can cope more effectively with a disaster when they know you have taken actions to protect them and that there are things they can do to keep safe.

Nowhere is this more the case than for tsunamis. What children know beforehand might not only save their lives, but yours as well. Take the case of Tilly Smith. In 2004, 10-year-old Tilly was on holiday in Thailand with her family. They were walking on the beach when Tilly noticed the ocean suddenly change. "I saw this bubbling on the water, right on the edge, and foam sizzling just like in a frying pan," she remembered. Only two weeks before, she had studied tsunamis at school in England and had seen a video of the 1946 tsunami striking Hawaii. What she had seen in the video looked just like what she was observing in Thailand. She told her parents a tsunami was coming. Her mother didn't believe her at first, but Tilly became very upset and insisted they do something. She and her family convinced people to evacuate the beach and the hotel manager (from Japan) told everyone to go to the upper floors of the building. Her quick thinking saved the lives of 100 people. For her actions, she was named "Child of the Year" by a French magazine and invited to a United Nations meeting on emergency response. You can hear Tilly talking about her experience at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0yrONL1Q3g>

This week, thanks to a donation from the Mia – Bo Foundation of the Humboldt Area Foundation, 180 copies of our book "The Extraordinary Voyage of Kamome. A Tsunami Boat Comes Home" will be donated to Humboldt County schools. The book will be given to every school library and every second grade classroom in the county. Last November, a donation from the Desert Community Foundation provided books to school libraries and classrooms in Del Norte County.

What does Kamome, the little tsunami debris boat, have to do with Tilly Smith? This bilingual English – Japanese book tells the story of a boat swept into the ocean by a tsunami, found in Crescent City two years later, and how a group of

Del Norte High students helped to return the boat to the High School in Japan that lost it. It is aimed toward lower elementary aged students in both the U.S. and Japan and tells a heart warming story of how good can come out of tragedy.

In the back of the book there is a section on talking to young children about disasters. One of the goals of the book is that not only will children enjoy the uplifting story of how an act of kindness brought a little happiness to a town devastated by the 2011 tsunami, but will also provides a door to talking to young children about earthquakes, tsunamis and how to stay safe.

The California Seismic Safety Commission has awarded the Humboldt Earthquake Education Center at HSU a two-year grant to develop curriculum to accompany the book. We will start with the story of Tilly Smith and other young tsunami heroines and heroes whose awareness and quick thinking helped save people in their communities. Check out the Kamome web site <http://humboldt.edu/kamome> for links to their stories and a guide to using them at home or in the classroom.

One more tip – when a disaster occurs, please consider limiting television coverage if young children are in your home. Children (and adults) don't benefit from graphic details or repeated exposure to disturbing images and sounds. The aftermath of a crisis, whether nearby or far away, is a good time to disconnect from media and sit down together and talk as a family.