

Japanese tsunami survivor starts over at Leelanau School

By Norm Wheeler
Sun editor

Ayaka Ogawa has no idea why she went to her grandmother's house that day. Her mother was there, maybe that's why. Usually after school she went home to the house where she lived with her parents, her older sister, and her other grandparents. This was in the small town of Hakozaki-cho, a village of 300 with bus service only three times a day. It is near Kamiishi City, in the Iwate Prefecture, in the state of Tohoku, Japan.

Ayaka was a senior, it was after school, she was in the house with her mother and grandmother, and it was Friday, March 11, 2011. At 2:46 p.m. the ground began to shake as a powerful earthquake (magnitude 9.0, one of the strongest ever recorded) rattled the house for five minutes. Knowing that earthquakes so strong often spawn a tsunami in the ocean, the three women jumped in Ayaka's mother's car meaning to drive to higher ground. But there were too many people in the road, all running uphill, so they got out and ran, too. Then the water was coming. "I was lucky," Ayaka says. "I ran up a mountain. Everyone was running. There were maybe 30 people who ran up there."

Further down in the village, closer to the sea, Ayaka's father and sister were at work when the quake hit. Her father tried to get to their house. Ayaka doesn't know what her beautiful sister did. Her sister, her father, her mother and both sets of grandparents were all swept away. The village was erased from the face of the earth, and it only exists now as a collection of prefab houses.

Ayaka is the only one in her family who survived.

The Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami killed 18,000 people. We all saw the television news coverage of the huge wave mov-

ing like a sideways snake at 800 kilometers per hour toward shore, the destroyed Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, and graphics showing whether or not the plume of radiation would blow toward Tokyo. We have since looked at the horrific YouTube videos of floating cars, boats crashing together, black water obliterating factories and warehouses, washing away homes and whole towns. The devastation was simply too much to grasp.

After spending two weeks in a shelter, Ayaka stayed with some relatives and joined her aunt and cousin in a "temporary house" in May. (Her uncle was also lost.) In May she was also invited to the American Embassy with other tsunami survivors. U.S. Ambassador John Roos and his wife Susan hosted a gathering that featured a noted Japanese pianist, and the American teen star Justin Bieber was there. Ayaka met Bieber and he invited her to his concert the following night. In June, Ambassador Roos visited Ayaka's school as she was graduating, and when he asked her what her plans were for the future, she replied that she just expected to get a job somewhere.

But Ayaka kept thinking about it, and on September 12, 2011 she sent Ambassador Roos a letter thanking him for visiting her school and telling him that she was interested in studying in the United States.

Many people and many travels later, Ayaka Ogawa arrived on June 24, 2012, to study English and art as a senior at the Leelanau School in Glen Arbor. An organization called Beyond Tomorrow helped Ayaka to find and to enroll at the Leelanau School, and the US/Japan Tomodachi (Friends) Fund, established to help students recovering from the disaster, funds Ayaka's travels.

Ayaka smiles easily, she is a very hard worker, and her English improves every day. She tells me that she still can't speak English well enough to have a real conversation, though she is increasingly understanding what she hears, so she is content to just listen for now. But you can tell that Ayaka won't be quiet for long. She delivered a poised and articulate speech to launch the Tomodachi Fund in Japan in April, and you can see and



hear Ayaka's speech if you Google her name or visit this link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QB91L_N94VA.

Ayaka says: "I think ties between people create ties between regions, and ties between nations create ties throughout the world." In thanking Beyond Tomorrow and the Tomodachi Fund for helping her to study in the United States, she vows, "I also hope to eventually be on the side of motivating and giving others opportunities. In the future, I hope to be active on the world stage in some field and contribute to the world."

Despite the cultural differences, Ayaka likes it here. "In Japan, the classroom is very structured, everything is in rows, only the teacher speaks, it is very formal, and the students must clean the school every day," Ayaka explains. "I like this school, because it is more friendly and relaxed, you get to listen to music while working on art projects, it is more American style, laid back."

We will have Ayaka Ogawa in our community for one school year to help her learn English and get into (hopefully) the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. When you see her around the village, please make her feel welcome, for she is friendly and open, and her story is astonishing. Ask her about Justin Bieber!

Leelanau School is springing for Ayaka's tuition. If you would like to support the school in their effort to help Ayaka realize her dream of an American education, please contact Admissions Director Brian Chatterley at (231) 334-5800 or bchatterley@leelanau.org.