

Tomodachi Initiative disaster aid helps Tohoku students to dream anew

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Three young women had simple aspirations before the 2011 earthquake and tsunami and ensuing nuclear crisis altered the landscape of Japan's northeast and their lives.

"I lost everything I had and my life was totally changed," said Ayaka Ogawa, her family's sole survivor after the tsunami hit Kamaishi city in Iwate Prefecture, which along with Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures was among the hardest-hit by the March 11, 2011 disaster.

Ogawa, 19, hardly imagined life beyond her hometown, but after losing her parents, older sister and grandparents with whom she had lived all her life, she had to accept the reality of braving the future on her own.

Opportunities such as visiting and studying in the United States came after meeting people from the Tokyo-based BEYOND Tomorrow Global Fund for Education Assistance. They introduced her and other youths affected by the terrible events to programs under the Tomodachi Initiative, which is designed to aid Japan's post-disaster recovery and deepen Tokyo-Washington ties.

The fund was set up to help disaster-hit students through scholarships and workshops and to mold them into the Tohoku region's future leaders.

Recalling how her aunt and cousin took her shopping months after the disaster, Ogawa said, "I remember how emotional I felt when I wore clothes other than the sweat suit we had been supplied with and I really appreciated the impact that fashion can have."

Ogawa, who is now in the 12th grade in Leelanau School in Michigan, said, "My newfound dream is to be a fashion designer and I hope someday my clothes will be able to move people's hearts."

Being able to dream is a turnaround from her attitude in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, when "nothing really mattered."

In a sign that she is coming to terms with her pain, Ogawa sent a drawing expressing gratitude for the support she has received to U.S. Ambassador to Japan John Roos on his birthday. The ambassador displays the drawing -- Ogawa's first piece of work since the disaster -- on the wall of his office.

Being more open now to challenges, Ogawa said, "The past is

the past, and the future is what I can do something about."

Like Ogawa, 17-year-old Atsuko Arimoto chose to study in the United States after being inspired by a short trip to the country in the summer of 2012 organized by BEYOND Tomorrow.

As a junior at St. Timothy's School in Maryland, Arimoto said her global perspective has widened thanks to her classmates and that she hopes to reflect her experience of the disaster by engaging in advocacy work in areas such as women's education.

Arimoto's ordeal began after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant began spewing radiation, forcing the evacuation of nearby residents, including Arimoto and her family, who lived in Okuma town within 3 kilometers of the plant.

Temporarily moving to Fukushima's Iwaki city, Arimoto said she experienced the discomfort of living as an evacuee and knows very well the "importance of assistance."

"Having been affected by the disaster myself, I am confident that I can understand more the feelings of people (who have suffered)," she said, adding that she began to "seriously consider being a diplomat" after going to the United States and being inspired by friends there who have clear goals in life.

The Fukushima resident also had a chance to share her experiences with her classmates and disseminate accurate information about the state of nuclear radiation in her hometown and Japan.

Among her priceless experiences was meeting then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last July at Roos' residence in Tokyo during a gathering of students affected by the disaster and delivering a speech before Clinton,

who was visiting Japan for an international conference.

Minori Endo, who survived the tsunami but lost her father and her home, opted to study in her hometown in Miyagi Prefecture's Ishinomaki city, but a short trip to the United States last year has emboldened her to do more for the Tohoku cause.

"We've just passed the second year since the March disasters, but I would be shocked if people would say that it has already been two years, because I think it is too early for the memory of the disasters to fade," said the 19-year-old freshman at Ishinomaki Senshu University.

Endo, being an only daughter, had a hard time accepting the harsh truth of her father's death, and she would call his mobile phone every day until his body was found.

During her U.S. trip, she visited the 9/11 Tribute Center, where she empathized with the bereaved relatives of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center. She was reminded of the value of family and the reality that even catastrophes can be easily forgotten.

Moving beyond the initial shock and sadness of the events of March 11, 2011, Endo updates her blog on 11th of every month as a tool to keep the memory of that day alive, and draws encouragement from peers she met through the Tomodachi programs.

Endo, who now lives in temporary housing in Kamaishi, said she wants to be a journalist so that she can convey the truth and the story behind every photo.

"I feel that if I just lead a normal life after the disaster and do not take any action to help other people, my experience may be forgotten," she said.



TOKYO, Japan - Students from the Tohoku region who were affected by the 2011 tsunami chat with volunteers in a workshop held in Tokyo's Chuo Ward on March 9, 2013. (Kyodo Photo)