

# Tomodachi program lets youths dream anew

Initiative offers shattered lives hope, inspiration, opportunities

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Three young women had simple aspirations before the 2011 earthquake and tsunami and nuclear crisis altered the landscape of the northeast and their lives on March 11.

"I lost everything I had and my life was totally changed," said Ayako Ogawa, who became the sole survivor of her family after the tsunami hit Kamaishi, Iwate Prefecture.

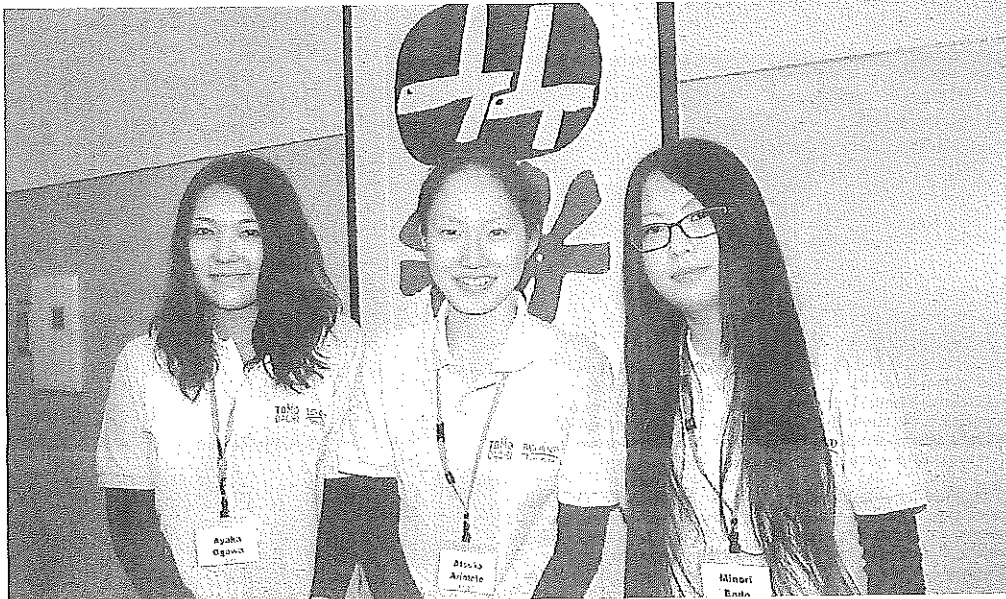
Ogawa, 19, hardly imagined life beyond her hometown, but after losing her parents, older sister and grandparents, she had to accept the reality of facing life on her own.

Enter the Beyond Tomorrow Global Fund for Education Assistance. The Tokyo-based fund, set up to help disaster-hit students with scholarships and workshops and mold them into future leaders in Tohoku, introduced her to programs set up under the Tomodachi Initiative, which is designed to facilitate Tohoku's recovery and deepen bilateral ties.

Among the programs were opportunities to visit and study in the United States.

Recalling how her aunt and cousin took her shopping months after the disaster, Ogawa said she had an early attraction to fashion.

"I remember how emotional I felt when I wore clothes other than the sweat suit we had been



Moving on: Tohoku residents Ayako Ogawa, Atsuko Arimoto and Minori Endo pose at an event held by the Beyond Tomorrow Global Fund for Education Assistance program in Tokyo on March 9. KYODO

supplied with and I really appreciated the impact that fashion can have," she said.

Now Ogawa is in the 12th grade at Leelanau School in Michigan, acting on that inspiration.

"My newfound dream is to be a fashion designer and I hope someday my clothes will be able to move people's hearts," she said.

Being able to dream again is a breakthrough from the shock she was in immediately after the disasters, 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 has the drawing — Ogawa's first since the tsunami — displayed on the wall of his office.

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

Like Ogawa, 17-year-old Atsuko Arimoto also chose to study in the United States after being inspired by a short trip there last summer 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 use her experience from the crisis to engage in advocacy work in areas such as women's education.

Arimoto's ordeal began after the core meltdowns at the Fukushima No. 1 power plant forced the nearest residents to evacuate, including Arimoto and her family, who lived in Okuma, one of the towns hosting the plant, just 3 km away.

After temporarily moving to Iwaki, Arimoto said she experienced the discomfort of being an evacuee and understands the "importance of assistance" very well.

"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 with clear goals in life.

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

Among her priceless experiences was last July meeting then-Secretary of State Hillary Rod-

ham Clinton at Roos' residence in Tokyo with other students affected by the disaster and delivering a speech.

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

"We've just passed the second year since the March disaster 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 Senshu University.

Endo, being an only daughter had a hard time accepting the harsh truth of her father's death. She called 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 relatives of those killed by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack on New York's World Trade Center. The visit reminded her of the value of family and the reality that even catastrophes can't be easily forgotten.

Moving beyond the initial shock and sadness of the event of 3/11, Endo updates her blog on the 11th of every month as a way to keep the memory of that day alive, and draws encouragement from peers she met through the Tomodachi programs.

Endo, who is living in temporary housing in Kamaishi, said she wants to be a journalist so 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 not take any action to help other people, my experience may be forgotten," she said.