

Tohoku teens share views of survival

Young network, share ideas at camp focused on leadership

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Asaka Yanada, a 15-year-old high school student from Kamaishi, Iwate Prefecture, ran as fast as she could toward a hill for 2 km, shepherding elementary school students, when the giant tsunami engulfed her hometown on March 11.

That's how she survived the biggest disaster of her young life. Now as a participant in the Tohoku Future Leaders Summit, she believes building cities well-prepared for evacuation with clear routes and signs is a key for minimizing the impact of future calamities.

"As a junior high school student, I could bear it, but I thought it was too much for 7- to 9-year-olds to run for 2 km" in a limited time, she told the other participants at the three-day leadership camp in Tokyo that ended Oct. 30.

Yanada was one of 70 high school students from Miyagi, Iwate and Fukushima prefectures to take part in the program organized by the Tokyo-based Global Fund for Education Assistance, to discuss how to rebuild and revitalize their shattered hometowns.

Students were divided into 10 groups to prepare four-minute presentations on the final day, with some of them staying up until 2 or 3 in the morning in heated discussion.

Yanada's group, which was chosen by judges as the best among the 10 groups, proposed that more direction boards showing evacuation routes be erected, and they must be easy to understand for first-time visitors and foreigners.

Her group focused on preparing for evacuation because it may be impossible to relocate all houses and other structures to high ground from coastal areas, according to a male student. "When tsunami come, all we can do is evacuate," he said.

To be well-prepared for such situations, the group also said quake-prone cities should hold emergency drills more often and they should involve people of all ages.

Other groups made proposals on creating jobs in Tohoku, revitalizing the agricultural sector, providing emotional support for quake and tsunami survivors and sharing their experiences of the disaster on websites.

The proposals will be presented to national strategy minister



Auld lang syne: High school students from the Tohoku region who participated in the three-day Tohoku Future Leaders Summit in Tokyo sing together at the end of the event Oct. 30. COURTESY OF TOMOYUKI SOWA

Motohisa Furukawa later this month.

Although their ideas may not come to immediate fruition, Minami Tsubouchi, executive director of the Global Fund for Education Assistance, said she hopes the students will someday become leaders of Japan and put their ideas into action.

'The students who were forced into an unimaginable situation are more likely to stand up for other people and take actions to make a difference.'

MINAMI TSUBOUCHI OF THE GLOBAL FUND FOR EDUCATION ASSISTANCE

"We hope to support the students (from Tohoku) until the point they can take leadership roles and contribute to the country in a broader sense, not just for Tohoku's reconstruction," Tsubouchi said.

The Global Fund for Education Assistance is supported by young executives such as James Kondo, head of Twitter Japan, Daisuke Iwase, executive vice president of Lifenet Insurance Co., and Oisix Inc. founder and CEO Kohey Takashima. The fund provides full scholarships for 10 university students a year from

the Tohoku region.

The emphasis is on nurturing young leaders because "we were concerned that there is a lack of young people who can take leadership roles in Japan in the first place," Tsubouchi said.

"But the students who were forced into an unimaginable situation are more likely to stand

up for other people and take actions to make a difference," she said, adding that her point was proved in the three-day program.

The students were chosen from among 222 applicants between 15 and 18 years old who survived the quake. Some lost family members in the disaster.

Naho Abe, 18, was one of these. She lost her mother in her hometown of Kesennuma, Miyagi Prefecture, one of the hardest-hit areas.

Abe and her mother evacuated to a school on a hill, but the tsunami swallowed them up

nonetheless as they tried to run from the sea.

"It was so dark in the muddy water that I couldn't see anything, and there was so much water pressure that I couldn't move my arms and legs," Abe said. "I tried to bear it, but soon I couldn't breathe. I gave up hope of living while swallowing the muddy water."

However, she said, a miracle occurred. She was pushed to the surface by a car in the water.

Unfortunately, the miracle didn't extend to her mother. "I can't feel happy at all by the fact that only I survived," she said.

She constantly feels regret. "If we had gone to a shopping center like my mother had suggested, we might have both survived. If we had run in a different direction, or if I could have been able to grab the hand of my mother who was only a meter away from me," the situation might have been different, she said.

In the nearly eight months since March 11, Abe said she hadn't been able to talk with other teenagers with similar experiences.

That is why she said the camp was a great opportunity for her to share her experience and dis-

cuss with other teens what they can do to rebuild Tohoku.

"There was no chance for me to talk about the disaster with high school students. So the best thing was that I met people who were in a similar situation and made friends with them," she said.

Abe said she is determined to contribute to the Tohoku reconstruction, especially after participating in the program. Her dream is to work at a hospital in Miyagi as a clinical engineer after studying at a university in Tokyo and dedicate herself to helping others.

Meanwhile, Sayaka Sugawara, 15, said she appreciated being able to learn what she should do to help rebuild the region.

"Before the program, I didn't know what to do on my own even if I wanted to. I used to think, 'I'm only a high school student.'"

Sugawara, who survived the tsunami in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, said she wants to help people who have suffered a traumatic experience like she did.

"I want to discover a lot of things only I can do, and gain more than what I have lost in the disaster," she said.