

Tomioka's cherry blossoms!

Handing the baton to the future

◆Reason behind the title: "Yonomori Cherry Blossoms" is the symbol of Tomioka Town. Since the nuclear accident, the area has been barricaded. Our team of 5 reporters decided on this title because it represents the community's hope and admiration for cherry trees that bloom gorgeously in spring, despite the disastrous situation.

Passing down the experience of the disaster through word of mouth

Yoshiko Aoki,

Representative of "Tomioka-machi 3.11-wo-kataru-kai"

The spirit of "Odagaisama," mutual appreciation

In Tomioka Town, people are working to have the evacuation orders lifted by the spring of 2023 for the entire town. Ms. Yoshiko Aoki, representative of NPO "Tomioka-machi 3.11-wo-kataru-kai" (Tomioka Town Storytellers of 3.11) says: "Radiation damage is invisible. So, we have an important role in verbalizing the damage caused by the nuclear disaster." At the Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum, we heard her speak and covered her efforts to pass down the horrors of the disaster. "Tomioka-machi 3.11-wo-kataru-kai," now a group of about 20 members, was created at an evacuation facility, from the volunteer center known as "Odagaisama center." Residents of Tomioka Town and Kawauchi Village evacuated to "Big Palette Fukushima", a convention facility located in Koriyama City. It was crowded, reaching 3,000 evacuees at the peak of the disaster, making everyone extremely stressed. Ms. Aoki, who lived in the city, went to the shelter every day to help out. Before the disaster, she was a teacher at Tomioka High School and she knew the community. At the Odagaisama center, she made a newspaper and also broadcasted information using mini-FM for the visually challenged. Two years after the disaster, a group of kataribe (storytellers) emerged among the users of the center to tell

what happened in their hometown.

During the storytelling, they showed a picture of a road from Tomioka Town to Kawauchi Village, jammed with evacuating cars. Normally it would take 30 minutes to travel the route, but on that day, it took three hours. The townsfolk did not know what was really going on, and they thought they would be able to return home soon. The police officers with protective masks were directing the traffic beside them. Later on, they realized how little information was given to them, compared to the police. In another story, there was a calf who survived a month after the disaster, even though the mother cow died in the disaster. An experienced farmer told me cows would never feed calves other than their own. The incident made them wonder if the extreme situation made cows feed the calf, despite their nature not to.

In April 2017, Ms. Aoki moved to Tomioka Town because she loved the town just like other residents. She emphasizes that it is "the duty of victims" to keep on telling stories of "the horrific nuclear disaster and damage that totally changed people's lives." She continued, "It is people that build or ruin the town. I want to revive the community of this town together with them."

(Yukino Kobayashi, Rina Watanabe)



Ms. Aoki talking about her storytelling activities and thoughts towards Tomioka Town



Ms. Aoki (left) and our team in front of the Memorial Museum



Visitors of the Memorial Museum

Fostering a new generation of storytellers

Interview with Ms. Aoki

We asked Ms. Aoki about her thoughts on storytelling.

Q: What are the challenges that you think you need to take on from now on?

A: To produce a young generation of kataribe or storytellers. Most of the current storytellers are seniors. Stories of the disaster must continue to be told. I'm putting effort into events and seminars for young people to foster their skills to express themselves.

Q: What are the things that you learned through the activities as a storyteller?

A: It's difficult to tell someone what you mean. I learned a lot from storytelling. I coordinate what I say according to the audience in order to deliver the message right.

Q: How do you feel about the changes in Tomioka Town?

A: I think we can divide the current residents into three categories: those who are working to revive the town; long-time residents since pre-disaster; and new residents who relocated here post-disaster, like myself. This town is different from what it was pre-disaster. I want to see more schools for

young people and places where all sorts of people can have discussions. I believe that schools, in particular, have an important role in connecting residents in the community.

Q: At what point do you think the town has fully revived?

A: Buildings and roads have been renewed, and you can surely see that revitalization has been going on. On the other hand, if the residents can live here, and share ideas and emotions without feeling uncomfortable, I believe it would be a revitalization, on the outside and the inside.

Q: Do you have times when it is hard talking about the disaster?

A: I was in Koriyama City at the time and didn't experience the nuclear disaster evacuation personally. Storytellers who did experience it say they find it difficult in remembering at times. They also say that when the audience shares the same emotions it is healing and calming. Online storytelling has been increasing since the pandemic, however, I think it's important to have live storytelling events, where it's easier to share the emotions and relate to each other.

(Sana Tomita, Ao Nakajima, Anna Yaginuma)

We wrote these articles!

It's our turn to tell



Yukino Kobayashi

(Soma High School, Sophomore)

This is my first time listening to what storytellers have to say. We didn't have a lesson where we listened or discussed the disaster at my elementary or junior high schools. To me, Ms. Aoki's story brought home the importance of the younger generation passing down tales about the disaster. When I become an adult, I hope I will be able to tell my future children "This is what happened..."

The importance of passing on stories



Sana Tomita

(Soma High School, Sophomore)

My fading memories of the disaster came alive again when I attended the storytelling session for the first time. The invisible damage of the nuclear disaster tends to be forgotten unless people keep passing on the story. This man-made disaster should never be allowed to fade away and I believe it is necessary for younger generations, who will determine the future, to gain accurate knowledge and think about the disaster, and keep passing on the stories.

Bonding with our hometown through words



Ao Nakajima

(Futaba Future Junior High School, Senior)

I listened to the story of the disaster in Tomioka Town, from the storyteller Ms. Aoki. After that, I listened to various stories and I learned that the disaster changed the lives of many people. I was four years old when the disaster occurred, and I don't remember it clearly. Through these interviews, I now have a better understanding of Futaba County where I grew up and spent time with my family before the disaster. I would like to have a career that has something to do with words and language, connecting people around me and the community.

There are still many "unknowns" about the nuclear power plants



Rina Watanabe

(Iwakiryokuin Junior High School, Freshman)

I was two years old at the time of the disaster. I understand that the hydrogen explosions occurred at the nuclear power station, but I didn't know how it happened. By attending the Journalism School program, I learned how it happened. Also, as I listened to the stories by the storytellers, I could visualize the horrific experience the victims of the nuclear disaster had to go through.

Encouraging words from graduates

Courage to take a step forward / Joy of getting the message across



Hiroto Sano

(University student, 20 years old)

As a graduate from the Journalism School program, I took the opportunity to help with the interviews and making the articles. No other event offers a place where students of various ages, from elementary to high school, work together to make an article. This event taught me/us how difficult it is to create a newspaper, and how important teamwork is. Another thing I learned, something especially important during interviews, is that "Ask whatever you have questions about." In this world full of information, I believe this lesson will be very helpful for my life from now on. (Hiroto Sano)

Make sure to pass it on



Anna Yaginuma

(Taira 3rd Elementary School, 5th grade)

Soon after I was born, the disaster occurred. As Ms. Aoki said, "It was the toughest moment for the parents who were taking care of their babies." My mother must have had a very hard time back then. Now I feel even more thankful to my parents and grandparents, who protected me. Ms. Aoki also said, "An invisible disaster will repeat itself unless we keep talking about it." I would like to pass on the stories of the disaster.



Ikumi Hamamatsu

(Office worker, 23 years old)

Since the big earthquake which struck the Tokyo metropolitan area, more and more people have asked me to tell them about the disaster. Even though I actually experienced the disaster eleven years ago, I find it really difficult to convey the message right. This is my second time attending the event as a graduate, and I want to have participants think about what and to whom they want to convey in the article when they interview people, and how they use their own words in writing the article. I hope I can help share the difficulties of doing so, and the joy of thinking. (Ikumi Hamamatsu)



Reporters asking Ms. Aoki about her activities as a storyteller



Reporters getting a lecture from Ms. Hamamatsu