

# **A Spring Journey Through Sakura Sprayed Tohoku.**

*A perspective of a humanitarian worker in the Tsunami sites of Japan.*

**April 21, 2011.** Tohoku is the name people call Northeast Japan areas, where Miyagi, Iwate, and Fukushima Prefectures are located and affected by May 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami. The devastation is huge, as long as 500 km of coastline, with populated cities, fishing ports, factories, and nuclear power plants.

Along the roads and streets of Tohoku cities, Sakura trees are blooming and radiating the areas with white and pink beautiful flowers. The trees are like sleeping beauty that seemed to remember nothing as they were submerged by a giant tsunami, triggered by a 9.0 Richter scale earthquake. So innocent, yet reminds us that hope still exists among the ruins of Tohoku as Sakura colors are sprayed around.

**Miyagi Four.** My journey with who I call Miyagi Four was special. They are director and relief coordinator of HOPE worldwide Japan (HWJ), a local NGO focusing in fundraising to help devastated residents around the world. Another two are leaders of Tokyo Church of Christ, HWJ's local partner and long time supporters. These Samurai men are just special and have big hearts to serve and help those in need in Tohoku. We drove through the long highway, passing the Fukushima areas, which is a scenic Sakura showered snowy mountainous view, a tourism area now devastated needing years of rebuilding.



**Natori City.** We drove through Natori city where ruins were clear. We saw thousands of cars lined up, beaten down, crushed along the roads. Houses were swept like matched crushed by a little baby. Nothing stands to the power of nature; not a thing. As we drove along the coast, some areas were still closed as Japan Self Defense Force members were searching for dead bodies. An officer prayed a circle green mark on a boat as a sign of clear area, no dead body or trapped individuals inside. He then marches to another site to continue the mind draining works.

**Iwanuma** is the next stop as we visit several places, including a Volunteer Center. Volunteers were lining up with their rain clothes and boots, some carrying shovel and buckets, waiting for their assignments of which house they can clean for the day. Young and old, men and women, office executives and blue collar workers, were there, doing what a human being should do; helping his/her neighbor. The center manager was excited when she met HWJ team. She expressed her concerns and request of assistance as they are overwhelmed by the humongous works they are responsible for. She expressed her concern as next week will be a 'golden week' holiday, where Japanese are expected to flood Tohoku areas to volunteer. However, concern exist that most volunteer may not be ready for the type of works that they are diving into. They need orientation and coordination.

**Troubled Neighbors.** As we passed through the highway in Natori, the houses were swept away or damaged; leaving debris of cars and anything that may still exists. A row of untouched houses were in the middle of it. Apparently, the high ground where it is located saves its residents. We see children playing in the beautiful, untouched playground as mothers accompany them. We wonder how lucky or save they are. Nights has passed by when they go to bed remembering their neighbors swept away, only to live in a dead city, and wondering why they are still spared by mother-nature. Traumas were identified in various disasters as survivors wonder why they still survive as others died. These are questions that will linger them for years and decades to come.



**The Stone rolled here.** When we entered Ishinomaki area, the thermometer on the street showed 9 degree Celsius temperature, about 48 degrees Fahrenheit, still a chilly afternoon it was. The bridge is welcoming us as it tries to hold on the structures where hundreds of ambulance, giant military trucks and supplies passed by; as if the bridge is saying, keep going, I have it covered for now. As we entered Ishinomaki city, ruins were apparent and relief workers was leaving their assignments to stay warm in nearby city for another day of rest. We pass through streets of broken dreams. Houses were damaged, stores were wiped away, and schools are not safe ground for kids no more. We saw a young girl walking in the cold weather with blank eyes, still in school uniform. Looks like she just finished her day in school and is walking back to wherever she is spending the night at during these tough times.



**Water of Hope.** In Ishinomaki, which means 'stone roll', the residents are definitely living a hard survival at evacuation centers. 300 stayed in this evacuation center above. Their daily activities may involve trying to stay warm, finding hot meals to cook in the cold weather, and searching for valuables and remains at their used to be homes. The residents here are lucky that the self defense force has set up a public warm bathing pool called 'water of hope'. For Japanese, bathing is such an essential part of life. Not only does it clean the dirt in their bodies, but the warm water can become a source of relaxation of the pain and hurts that they are experiencing from the water of death last month.



**Memory Vanished.** An older lady walked by us as the night falls. She was straight-looking with no smile or famous Japanese warmth in her body gestures. She just walked by with teary eyes, straight through the road with rubbles on the side, including a burnt down three-story school. We think she just came back from searching for her valuables. We found some pictures among the rubbles. One worth noting is a picture of a man scuba diving. The picture described a great memorable moment of his/her holiday in some warm weather

paradise. However, that memory was floating around the cold tsunami waves and leaving it stranded by the sidewalk. As sign was apparent on the street; beware of children and bicycle. However, it is now laying flat among the ruins after the tsunami water passed through without reading or understanding the meaning of the sign. It is located right at an intersection where a large school used to be at. Future will tell if there will be kids crossing this intersection again or not. For now, the sign is down; no kids are walking through here nor welcomed in this ruins.



**Running Man.** As we advance, a man stood out was running in his running outfit, trying to break some sweat; or even relieving his distress from the troubles exists. Many Japanese are trying to figure out how they can run away from this mess. Young men and elderly were seen in evacuation centers just sits for hours, wondering what they can do in their cubical; a scene they see from television that describe developing nations where poverty was rampant. How could it be in Japan? We work hard to build a nice life, only to end up in cardboard boxes of a cold basketball hall, sharing cold floors with hundreds others, staying warm in small kerosene heater that are spread around the buildings.



**Yudai Takemoto** is looking at ruins of his hometown Miyagi Prefecture (province) of Northeast Japan (Tohoku). His uncle was living in an evacuation center at Tatekoshi Elementary School. However, he has moved on to stay at another unknown place. Yudai also remember many of his childhood friends who are either living in evacuation center or even dead or missing in the area. Today, through HOPE worldwide Japan, Yudai is the Relief Coordinator to plan a disaster response for his hometown Miyagi. He wants to bring hope and change lives for the people of Tohoku. '**Ganbaru Tohoku**' is the new saying that springs up now. It means 'Move Forward Tohoku'. HOPE worldwide is working to support people in Tohoku area to survive their emergency and to rebuild their lives.



Your involvement, participation, and contribution is definitely urgent and necessary for the people of Japan. Let us bring Hope and change lives together. Arigato!

\* To download HOPE worldwide Japan's Miyagi Assessment Report, please visit <http://reliefweb.int/node/398692>

### **For more information or inquires**

#### **HOPE worldwide**

353 W. Lancaster Ave Suite 200 Wayne, PA 10000

Telp: 1.610.254.8800 Fax: 1.610.254.8989 website: [www.hopeww.org](http://www.hopeww.org)

Charles M. Ham, Global Disaster Response Coordinator, email:

[charles\\_ham@hopeww.org](mailto:charles_ham@hopeww.org)

Mandy Jordan, Development Officer, email: [mandy\\_jordan@hopeww.org](mailto:mandy_jordan@hopeww.org)

