

Iwaki Vision: 5 years after the Great East Japan Earthquake

Interview with Heidi Bresler: former Coordinator of International Relations

(Iwaki Vision volumes 51-62 Autumn 2003-Summer 2006)

Member of the 2011 Satogaeri (Homecoming) Project for Former JETs

Please offer us some background on your initial time in Iwaki.

My very first visit to Iwaki was as a high school student from Iwaki's Sister City, Townsville in 1993. I had such a wonderful time in Iwaki that it was always my dream to return someday. I was very pleased to be chosen as the Coordinator of International Relations for Iwaki City from 2003 to 2006. I also worked as an elementary school ALT from 2006 to 2008. My husband was also an ALT in the city and mainly worked at junior high schools. During our time in the city, we met so many wonderful people and experienced so many different things.

Where were you during the time of the earthquake of 11 March 2011?

The 11th March was the first day of my holidays, so I was at home in Australia. My mother called and said she had seen a news report that there had been a huge earthquake in Japan. She said she thought that it was Fukushima. I quickly turned the TV on and I was surprised to see Fukushima. Suddenly, there were reports of the Tsunami that followed the earthquake and I saw images of Onahama Port. I couldn't believe my eyes. Then details of the nuclear power plant disaster emerged. I was shocked and sat there watching the news reports for hours.

What were your thoughts during the initial days after the triple disaster?

I had a lot of trouble sleeping during the initial days after the triple disaster. I was so worried about my friends and people who I consider like my own family in Iwaki. I frantically tried contacting everyone, but it was very difficult to get in touch. I was also contacted by a number of former JET participants who were also trying to get in touch with their Japanese friends and asked me to help.

When I finally managed to get in touch with people, I was so relieved that they were ok. I really wanted to help them, but it was very difficult since I was so far away. I saw that many charities were accepting donations to help people in Japan, but I wanted to directly help the people in Iwaki, so I contacted some friends in Iwaki and asked about local organisations who would accept donations. I contacted many friends, relatives and acquaintances from around Australia and asked them to donate money to Iwaki. Thanks to their generosity, I collected approximately AU\$3,200 and donated it directly to the Iwaki City Disaster Relief Fund. It was a small contribution, but I thought that this may help in some way.

I hear that you volunteered in the Satogaeri (Homecoming) Project for Former JETs shortly after the disaster. Could you tell us more about the project and what it aimed to achieve?

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in conjunction with the Japan Tourism Agency, hosted the Satogaeri (Homecoming) Project for Former JETs which supported the "homecoming" of experienced former Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) participants who worked for two years or more as Assistant Language Teachers / Coordinators for International Relations to the disaster-stricken areas where they formerly served.



A burnt out kindergarten bus at Hisanohama. A large fire started after the earthquake which destroyed the beachfront area of Hisanohama.



Prayer offerings for those who lost their lives in the Tsunami at the waterfront in Hisanohama.

I was honoured to be selected as one of the 14 former JET participants from across the globe to participate in the Satogaeri Project in the three prefectures of Iwate Prefecture, Miyagi Prefecture and Fukushima Prefecture. The main objective of the project was for the participants to gain a better understanding of the situation in Japan following the disaster. As there was a lot of negative publicity following the events of 11th March, 2011, it was important for participants to report on the safety of travelling and living in Japan via various media sources to dispel the negative publicity which Japan received after the disaster.

Do you believe your efforts in the Satogaeri Project and any other volunteer work helped in the recovery of Fukushima/Iwaki or helped restore a positive image of the prefecture/city?

Participating in the Satogaeri Project gave me and other participants a chance to reconnect with the people of Tohoku and help with various volunteer projects in the area. I spent time visiting my previous workplaces, reconnecting with community groups, visiting disaster stricken areas on the coast and helping local people clean up their properties which were partially destroyed by the disaster. When I returned to Australia, I conducted various interviews with newspapers, magazines and live radio interviews which helped restore a positive image of Japan and in particular Fukushima.



Six months on from the earthquake, excavators were still working every day to clear the damaged homes.

What do you think are the most important steps that should be taken towards the ongoing recovery and revitalisation efforts of Iwaki/Fukushima?

I think one of the most important steps in the recovery and revitalisation efforts is to continue to support residents who have been displaced by the disaster and resettle them into the community. A large number of people who lived in areas outside of the city have now relocated to Iwaki City. It is important for them to not only have assistance in rebuilding their houses, but also support in rebuilding their lives in a new community which they now call home.

Would you like to offer a message to the people of Iwaki and Fukushima 5 years after the Great East Japan Earthquake?

Although 5 years have passed, I am sure there are many people in Iwaki and Fukushima who are still on the road to recovery. The strength and determination of the people is truly inspiring. I am proud to have lived in such a wonderful community and hope that each year the recovery efforts continue to progress. In true Iwaki style, I would like to say never give up and "Ganbatte Iwaki!"



A small shrine in Hisanohama. The area around it was completely destroyed but the shrine remained. The large red torii gate leading to the shrine had collapsed.



Heidi (left) with her "Japanese mother" and IIA member, Yumiko Nemoto at the volunteer centre in Taiji. The poster and the paper cranes in the background were wishes from school children for the recovery efforts in Iwaki.