After the Horror

Japan Slowly Recovers from the Tsunami

It took minutes for the tsunami and earthquake on March 11, 2011, to devastate Japan. Two years later communities remain in tatters. Three clubs were particularly devastated. Eleven of the 70 members of the Rikuzentakata Lions Club died. Almost all 36 members of the Minami Sanriku Shizugawa Lions Club lost both their homes and workplaces. All 30 members of the Iidate Lions Club remain in evacuation facilities. The Lions are bravely carrying on, taking care of their families, re-establishing their workplaces, rebuilding their towns and continuing to serve as Lions.

Rikuzentakata Lions Club, Iwate

On the 11th of every month, Lion Seiichiro Kanno and his wife bring a can of Coke and flowers to what remains of the once-imposing Rikuzentakata Post Office, where their only son, Hiroyuki, worked. To his father’s delight, Hiroyuki took after him in many ways. He preferred soda to alcohol, for example. For Kanno, all of that seems more than a lifetime ago.

The city finally is tearing down the post office, which only had its exterior walls left. Seeing the building come down makes Kanno reflect on his son’s final
moments: “What was Hiroyuki thinking as the water bore down on him?” Little things remind him of his son, and his eyes moisten. Well-meaning but blunt, people have told him, “Don’t let it get you down for so long.” But, for Kanno, remembering his lost son is the one thing he can do for him.

Rikuzentakata is now famous in Japan for its Solitary Pine Tree of Miracle, the single tree left standing in forest of 70,000 trees. Last September, to preserve the tree, the city carefully uprooted it. In November the city demolished the Civil Gymnastic Hall, where terrified residents fled. The hall, an official evacuation site, was believed to be safe. Only three of the 100 so or people there survived.
The city is moving forward. All public buildings are slated for teardown soon. The city’s reconstruction plan includes creating a bank 12.5 meters high and a memorial park by the shore. The business district will be elevated five to eight meters higher than before. The construction company owned by Lion Shu Kinno, which resumed its operation sooner than any other company after the disaster, is heavily involved in debris removal. “We need to hurry. We have to clear up the land soon and move on. Otherwise, recovery will be forever out of our reach,” says Kinno, club president.

The first club meeting of November 2012 held in a temporary office.
But the rebuilding is fraught with tension. Some residents want to preserve buildings as abiding memorials. Rikuzentakata Lions formerly met at the Capital Hotel, which offered gorgeous views of the pine forest. Demolition was halted after citizens protested.

Initially, members of other Lions clubs visited Rikuzentakata to help. After about a year, Rikuzentakata Lions realized that it was impossible to continue hosting Lions eager to help. They needed to focus on reviving their businesses and politely told other Lions financial help was most appreciated.

Lion Satoru Sugawara opened a makeshift gas station just a month after the tsunami. He called it “Ganbaro,” which means Let’s Hang Tough. Last November he began construction on a permanent building. Sugawara is anxious to move ahead so his employees can return to work.

Matayoshi Kumagai, 2011-12 president, welcomed his son back to his water supply company a year ago. The son received training in Tokyo before returning to greatly help the business recover. But neither Kumagai nor his company can do anything about the lack of housing. None of his employees have a permanent home yet.

For years the Rikuzentakata Lions Club held a youth speech contest. The year they hosted a speech workshop in which schoolchildren expressed their hopes
for the future. One group of children unveiled detailed, ambitious city dioramas and appealed to adults to rebuild their beloved hometown.

Minami Sanriku Shizugawa Lions Club, Miyagi

Many delicious-looking cakes in the shelves of Lion Yuichi Abe’s bakery, “Yushindo.” He wants to “bring smiles to the faces of the residents in the town with my cakes.”

The torrent of water washed away precious recipes for his cakes, breads and pastries. A year ago, working strictly from memory, Lion Yuichi Abe reopened his cake shop in a temporary strip mall. He wakes at 4 each morning and works far into the night. A long night’s sleep is a luxury. As club president, he spends many
hours networking with Lions from other towns who offer aid. He says he struggles between feeling grateful for the support and the stress of meeting his responsibilities as a shop keeper and a Lions leader.

After a nine-month delay, the club held its 50th charter celebration last April. The club invited Lions from clubs throughout Japan that had traveled to their town to help. Nearly 300 Lions attended. The tsunami was sadly ironic for the club, which was initially organized to provide assistance to Chili after a terrible earthquake and tsunami there.

Abe, the baker, escaped from the tsunami with two young employees. One eventually quit her job after giving birth, and the other left because of her emotional distress over the disaster. Abe hired two employees in their 50s. Other stores in the strip mall face the same problem of finding young workers. The town’s population was 18,000 before the disaster and perhaps less than 12,000 now. Businesses can’t afford high wages. Young parents have moved away.

Lion Shinichi Sato, president of the Shizugawa Primary School PTA, sees the same problem. With housing in short supply, enrollment dropped from 450 to less than 50.

In the year after the disaster residents, though heartbroken, were determined to show a strong resolve. As time passed by, harsh reality sunk in. What was best?
Sell their property in the flood zone or exchange the land for property in an elevated area?

On the streets in the area that used to be the business district before the disaster, there are many signs like this one with words that convey thoughts of the business owners.

A beat ahead of the deadly torrent of water, Sato had hustled out of his photo studio with a camera bag and other tools of his livelihood. He resolved “to keep a photographic records of the town until the day it achieves full recovery.” Vowing to stay the course, he reopened his photo studio in a temporary shopping mall.

But even Sato will have to decide on relocating. The town’s plan is to keep the mall open for five years. Residential plots of land will be developed in three
locations on elevated ground, and the flat land in the town’s center will exclude residences. That’s problematic because before the disaster most of the store owners used their business premises as living quarters as well.

For now Sato continues his documentary work. He traveled through Japan to exhibit his images of the town’s post-disaster situation. He also visited London last year in August during the Olympics. Sato proudly displayed his photos at an event held to show Japan’s gratitude to the world for the aid that poured in.

**Iidate Lions Club, Fukushima**

Thirty-five years ago, after painstakingly learning his craft as a cook in Yokohoma and Yokosuka, Sakae Akaishizawa opened a noodle shop in Iidate with money saved from a second job as a driver. The restaurant he built in the middle of rice paddies became an immensely popular community fixture. The tsunami rubbed out the restaurant in a flash. Akaishizawa was heartbroken. Making things worse were the required evacuations. Akaishizawa and his wife, along with his 82-year-old mother and pet dog, relocated to rental housing. He kept busy as a fire department leader, providing drinking water and goods to residents.
Kohaku (amber in Japanese) is the name of the restaurant in Yokosuka where he worked in the past. ‘I heard that it’s a precious stone in China, and I particularly like the strong look of the Chinese characters - it almost looks like saying ‘never give in!’

Iidate is a small village in a scenic mountain valley that counted 6,000 residents before the disaster. The village motto is “madei,” which means “with thoughtfulness” or “in a courteous manner.” Life in the farming village, endowed with rich natural resources, had always been calm and peaceful. Like Akaishizawa, their club president, the other Lions in Iidate considered themselves fortunate. Retired from a government job, Hiroshi Kanno contentedly grew vegetables in a sizeable field. Seiichi Shiga practiced an eco-friendly lifestyle. Using his skills working with sheet-metal, he fashioned a hand-made wood burning stove out of a recycled gas tank.
After the earthquake, Iidate accepted approximately 4,000 evacuees from the coastal area. That turned out to be a terrible mistake. Authorities soon realized that the whole village was heavily contaminated with radiation from the nearby Fukushima nuclear plant. All residents had to leave.

Lions relocated far and wide. Three club officers got busy keeping in touch with the widely scattered members. Lions in Japan donated funds to the club, and Lions Clubs International waived dues. Somehow the club continued on. The first club gong after the earthquake was heard in January 2012. Members commiserated with one another. “I can say with full confidence that our club is a firmly united,
friendly club, and we can say anything to each other,” says Akaishizawa. A meeting was later held in Fukushima, and some members traveled more than two hours. Before the earthquake, members had met at a restaurant and ate “botan-nabe,” or boar’s meat hot pot. Now the food was not the focus. Lions spoke of the fear of nuclear contamination projects. “We became more knowledgeable than the experts,” a Lion half-joked.

Authorities reorganized their once idyllic village into three sections: “area preparing for evacuation order release,” “habitation restriction area” and “difficult
to return area.” According to the government, decontamination will be completed by March 2014.

Akaishizawa, the noodle shop owner, wonders if his village will ever recover. Will only the elderly come back? Even if people return, the days of collecting mountain vegetables in the spring, wild mushrooms in the autumn and growing vegetables in the backyard may never come again.

Yet there are spots of light in the darkness. Akaishizawa has reopened his noodle shop in a temporary building. He cut the menu in half because of sparse kitchen equipment. But business is good. Longtime customers travel great distances just for his signature “Kohaku” ramen, the rich noodle soup filled with crispy pork and piles of vegetables. When he sees his customers hunched over their bowls or chatting with one another, content and satisfied at least momentarily, Akaishizawa can half-believe the days to come may equal the days that went before.
Editor’s Note

Adapted from a story from the Japanese LION. This story will also be featured in the May edition of LION Magazine.

Lions Clubs International Foundation mobilized more than US$21 million for Japan relief efforts thanks to LCIF grants and donations from Lions worldwide. Among other projects, LCIF helped Lions provide equipment and supplies to support victims who were relocated to transitional housing; provide major medical equipment for hospitals, including a full-body radiation detection unit, ophthalmology equipment and an x-ray machine; and assistance for an economic revival project.