

Project Friendship Part 1

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September 27, 2011

Inception

At 2:46pm local time on March 11, 2011, one of the biggest earthquakes in recorded history struck off the coast of Japan. The quake and subsequent tsunami claimed thousands of lives; the meltdown of a nuclear reactor has affected thousands more. I had been in the middle of conducting research for my Ph.D. but chose to leave Japan, and found myself on a flight back to the United States on March 22.

It hadn't been an easy decision.

This is my ninth year in Japan, and I'm 33 years old. Essentially, I've spent most of my adult life here. Leaving Japan, leaving Nagano, meant leaving home. It was easy to tell my American friends and family I was headed stateside; telling my friends in Nagano I was leaving made me cry. It made me feel like I was leaving them, and that I wouldn't have a part to play in the relief efforts. I guess in a way I felt like I was suddenly abandoning a community I'd been trying to belong to for several years.

I know none of my friends thought that (and in retrospect, I know my extreme feelings were a part of dealing with the shock of what was happening.) All my close friends told me to go home and show everyone I was fine, Japan would be fine. I was lucky; we were lucky. We still had our friends, families and homes. Saying goodbye was temporary. We all knew I was coming back. Lots of people had suffered – and would continue to suffer – much more than I would from this disaster. While flying to Chicago, I focused on that, specifically the people in the most affected areas who had lost more than I can list. I concentrated on re-shaping shock into positive action.

I started asking myself how I could help without being on the scene. I knew the crisis would be considered old news in a few months at best, but that relief efforts, clean-up, and rebuilding would take years. In particular, building *homes* – not just in the structural sense – would be difficult. I wondered what people would need or want or simply appreciate aside from the daily necessities. Something tangible. Something small. Something individual. Something handmade. Something beautiful. Something that would help make even temporary places *home*. With each descriptor, the range narrowed.

My mind hit on *quilts*.

Full-size ones wouldn't be practical in terms of making, shipping and moving them. But what about mini quilts, squares that are used for wall-hangings? I have several on my own walls, gifts from family and friends before I came to Japan to live. I wondered if this idea was insane. Up in

the air, on my way to the States, that idea bounced around in my head. I couldn't let it go, even if it *did* seem crazy.

After arriving in North Carolina, I called Nao Nomura, my good friend from The University of Tokyo. We studied together there, and when I started doing fieldwork in Japan, she started her fieldwork in Pennsylvania. She does research on American material culture – specifically, quilts.

Nao explained that she had felt terrible after the disaster, too. It was hard being away from home with all these things happening. You feel like you should be there, too, that it isn't fair to the people experiencing it that we are watching safely from a distance. The images glide by, and you feel helpless, disconnected. I understood her feelings. I'd been in Nagano when the planes hit the World Trade Center in New York. When she told me about watching the tsunami hit places like Rikuzentakata, Kesenuma and Ishinomaki on television, my mind automatically returned to the dark room and the glow of the TV as I, transfixed, watched the towers fall ten years ago – first one, then the other. What a ghastly feeling, knowing you are watching people die and there is nothing you can do to stop it. It's unnerving, to say the least, to know that the world is changing right before your eyes.

I told her I had an idea. One that I hoped would help those living in the hardest hit areas. One I hoped would help us feel better about not being able to help directly right away. I asked her if doing a quilt project was crazy.

“It's not crazy at all. It will work!”

“You think so?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Will you help me?”

“Of course.”

And so it began.

**** Organization ****

There is a lot of talk about how academics need to avoid becoming permanent fixtures in ivory towers. Particularly in anthropology where I work, and in American Studies where Nao works, we are encouraged to really engage with the communities we live and work in – to avoid armchair analysis and be a part of the community as much as possible. We're encouraged to be ourselves in the community, to remember to take on responsibilities we would wherever we lived. For me, this has meant everything from participating in neighborhood sports day to being in charge of trash day to exchanging homemade foods with my neighbors.

In terms of a relief project, it occurred to us that we should try to help in whatever way felt most natural to us. But the more we thought about it, we agreed that we could use our academic training to do it. So Nao and I started this project first and foremost to help others, second to help ourselves deal with our own trauma, third to channel the goodwill towards the survivors that we knew existed in both the States and Japan, and lastly to show that the skills we develop as academics can be used to benefit communities. In other words, our primary goals were *not* academic – but we are certainly using the skills and resources we’ve built up as researchers to get the project rolling. Essentially, what that means is that we have attempted this project in the same methodical way we do our research.

We needed several things: quilters, a way to get the finished quilts to Japan, and a distribution method. We decided to work from both ends, contacting quilters and government officials first. We talked to family members, friends, professors, scholarship organizations and city hall workers. In April, it was confirmed that several families from hard-hit areas had relocated in Nagano City, where I live. I asked a friend who works in city hall, Mitsuyoshi Nakazawa, if the municipality would be interested in supporting our project by helping fund distribution. They were.

Meanwhile, Nao had asked the Lincoln Quilters Guild if they were interested in participating, and she received an emphatic “yes.” Groups my mother participates in, Willowdale Quilters and Dakota Prairie Quilt Guild from South Dakota, also agreed to work with us. I returned to Nagano in May, and by July, South Dakota quilters had sent a box of 32 squares. A box of 30 from Lincoln quickly followed (“with more to come!”) in August, and a box of 49 from Hawaii Quilt Guild also arrived in September. The Hawaii Guild plans to send another box, and we’re waiting on a few others.

Although we’ve tried to secure funds to cover costs for shipping from other donors, groups or individual quilters have thus far opted to use their own funds to send the quilts for expedience. And although we considered asking large companies for help, we got the best responses from (perhaps predictably) people we knew who worked in small organizations. This truly is a grass-roots project.

** Distribution **

Hoshina Hot Springs

Nagano Prefecture has, so far, housed 400 families opting to leave Tōhoku. Nagano City has offered housing to about 70 of these families. While other municipalities have rules about preference given to families with young children (under age 15), or families living within a certain distance from the nuclear reactor in Fukushima, Nagano City officials proudly told me they have neither of these stipulations. Anyone can come.

I also learned that the City had planned to offer temporary relief to families who wanted to bring their children to Nagano for summer vacation. Many of these people live close to the melted-down reactor. They couldn't open their doors or windows for relief from the summer heat. They were told to have their children wear long pants, long-sleeved shirts, and masks when they leave the house for school. Kids can't go outside to play. (In fact, one of the most heart-breaking things I saw at Hoshina was the "wish tree" where people wrote their hopes for the future and tied them to a bamboo branch as part of the Tanabata Festival. One child had written, "I want to play outside again.") Municipal workers hoped that allowing these families a break in a city-operated hot spring resort would allow them to relax and give children a chance to play freely outside.

I used to be an English teacher. When I heard about this summer program, I immediately thought of all the English camps I've done in the past. I asked Mr. Nakazawa if they'd want me to do a "Let's play in English" day with the kids. The team in charge of the Hoshina Hot spring project liked the idea. They already had other people coming in to do activities, so they were sure at least some of the kids would participate. After a few minutes, Mr. Nakazawa asked if I wanted to give those families quilts, too – to make them part of Project Friendship. "This way, we can see how people respond," he said. It was a great idea. We decided to try it.

On August 24, we went up to Hoshina ready to play! The nine kids who came were between 4 and 6, and also included Mr. Nakazawa's three-year-old daughter. We sang songs, read books, played games, and made a giant monster poster. At the end, the mothers came to pick them up, and we took that time to explain Project Friendship to them. We showed them the quilt squares, and told the kids they could each choose one.

There was a general frenzy as the kids scrambled to the table, finding a mini-quilt they liked, and running triumphantly to their mothers, holding out their prize. No fighting. Lots of smiles. A little boy with big, mischievous eyes picked a soccer-ball themed quilt and ran around the room with it. A shy little girl with long hair and eyelashes slipped in between all the others, carefully pulled out a pink and green quilt with cartoon bugs in the center, and wordlessly held it up for me to see. I gave her a big smile, which she returned before scampering off. (Her mother came up to me later and, in perfect English, said "Please tell your mother and her friends hello. And thank you for this.") Another little girl picked a quilt with pink and green fabrics, while another chose a rainbow kite design. The mothers thanked us, and sent the kids back to us to say thank you, too.

Even Mr. Nakazawa's daughter, who had been shy and wasn't so sure about playing with all these "big kids," found a green shamrock mini quilt that she liked. She was holding it close to her with both hands, looking as though she'd never let go. When her father noticed, he sheepishly asked me, "Um, Ms. Pamela, is it really okay she takes this?" This little girl wasn't a Tōhoku kid, but she came to play. And her father was instrumental in getting the project going. "Of course she can have it! She's part of the project, too."

Nagano City

On September 13, Nao came up to Nagano, fresh from finishing her research on Amish quilts in Pennsylvania. It's been a year since we've seen each other face-to-face, so we had a lot to talk about! When we got to Project Friendship, I pulled out the boxes of quilts so she could see them.

One thing I did not anticipate (but should have) was that just having these quilts in my house made *me* feel happier and inspired. Looking through them, photographing them, trying to find words for the patterns, the fabrics, the textures – I was reminded that someone had made each one. Each is unique. And each person who participated shared our goal in wanting to spread goodwill and hope. We found ourselves remarking over the stitching of one, the fabric of another, or the patterns of yet another still. All these colors, shapes and designs! No wonder the kids at Hoshina got so excited.

We went through and chose the 50 we'd take to City Hall the next day to present to the section in charge of disaster relief.

Nao and I went into the office the next day and were met by Mr. Nakazawa, Mr. Ageishi and the section chief from Disaster Relief, and two members of the press. Mr. Ageishi had located a family who had come from Fukushima who would come in, meet us, and allow themselves to be photographed receiving a quilt. While we waited for the family to arrive, the section chief looked over the quilts, pausing on one my mother made. "Wow, I want this one!" he said. He was fingering the bluebird design. Nao stepped over and began to explain the techniques to him: "See how she added batting and then stitched around the bird? That brings it into relief. And this blue fabric she used to frame it is the same color, making it stand out even more." He nodded and asked her a few questions about her own work.

A few minutes later, we heard footsteps coming down the hall. The Maruyama family stepped into the room. Mrs. Maruyama came in holding her younger son, who is two years old, while the older son, who is four, trailed behind her but ahead of his father. The parents bowed their heads to us, taking the seats offered to them by Mr. Ageishi.

Nao and I explained the project to them, then pulled several out of the carrier bag we'd used to transport them. It was the general consensus that the older son would choose for the family.

Up until this point, he'd been fairly quiet and shy. But as soon as the quilts came out, he was nearly climbing on the table, trying to find his favorite. In the end, he chose one with rainbow kites on a blue sky. One of the reporters asked him why he picked that one. "It has stars. See?" And he pointed to small red stars on one of the quilts. He quickly pulled it away, and gave it to his mother.

We spent several minutes playing with the kids and talking to the parents. I shook Mrs. Maruyama's hand and she thanked me, saying that some days are good and some days are still

very difficult. “Especially when we talk to people still in Fukushima,” she said. Her eyes moved to the kites on the quilt. “But this helps. Thank you.”

****Afterword****

After the Maruyamas left, we turned to the section chief and formally presented the remainder of the quilts to him. The municipality will send them to each of the families who have moved to Nagano City from Fukushima, Iwate and Miyagi prefectures. We also spent nearly an hour talking to representatives from two local papers. They’ve since published short articles on the project.

Before we left, Mr. Ageishi caught us and let us know that the number of families in Nagano City had increased to nearly 70 since we’d last talked. We assured him we had more to bring in and would do so the next day. When we’d moved into the hall, Mr. Nakazawa leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Have you seen the young woman who works in that section?” We nodded. “Actually, she really likes these. And she just came from Fukushima to Nagano herself as a bride...” We understood. “We’ll put in an extra one.” He gave us a big smile.

The next day, we took in the remainder for Nagano City. We gestured towards the young woman. Mr. Ageishi smiled and beckoned her in a big voice, “Hey! You got permission!” She blushed a bit and came over. “Thank you. After seeing them, it’s hard not to want one yourself.”

We know the feeling.

****Future Plans****

Nao and I have decided that our next goal for Project Friendship is to expand to provide mini-quilts to all families who have evacuated to Nagano Prefecture by March 11, 2012. So far, 83 of approximately 500 families have received quilts. If you or your quilt group would like to participate, please contact Pamela Runestad (plr-mitchell@hotmail.com) for more information.