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IWU Alumni, Faculty and Students Team Up to Help Japan

June 2, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The 8.9-magnitude earthquake that rocked Japan on March 11, combined with the subsequent tsunami and nuclear reactor crisis it triggered, left in its wake thousands dead and nearly half a million homeless, according to CBSnews.com.

In the shadow of such devastating tragedy, the Illinois Wesleyan University community stepped up to the plate to provide hope and aid from the other side of the world. From on-site volunteer work to on-campus fundraising events, IWU alumni, faculty and students have spent the last few months doing all they can to bring relief to those affected by this year's disasters.

"I am so close to everything that has happened, while lucky enough to be out of harm's way," said IWU alumna Margaret Kocher, '09, who is currently teaching English in northern Japan through the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme. "I got involved because I felt that I needed to help somehow."

Attributing her leadership skills to her experience at IWU, Kocher said there was "no question" about whether she would contribute to relief efforts in the aftermath of the disasters. "The events in March, as horrible as they were, had many positive outcomes," said Kocher. "I think the relations between the people of Japan and many foreigners working here have strengthened. Everyone is helping rebuild Japan, and it is beautiful."

A former Hispanic studies and music double-major, Kocher is now an active member of the grassroots organization volunteerAKITA, which formed in March to help rebuild Japan after the earthquake and tsunami. According to Kocher, volunteerAKITA recently spearheaded a movement to address one problem that seems to have slipped under the radar in the midst of many others.

"An English teacher in my town organized a food and supplies drive to bring items to the Miyagi Prefecture region, and while he was there he spoke with a few volunteers at the local shelter who told him most people were in need of fruit. The miso soup and rice just weren't cutting it," said Kocher. "A few of us in town got together and started brainstorming, and now volunteerAKITA's Fruit Tree Project does fruit runs to shelters."

Kocher said in its first 10 days of delivery, the Fruit Tree Project raised nearly \$10,000 and supplied over 15,000 items of fruit – including oranges, sunfruit, grapefruit, apples and bananas – to nine shelters throughout Japan. "Because the town of Akita is much closer to the devastation than larger cities with established support networks, it is easier and less expensive for volunteerAKITA to give help to those who need it most," she said, adding that thanks to support from larger non-governmental organizations in Japan, the group was recently able to create a website accepting outside donations.



During one of volunteerAKITA's weekend Big Clean trips, a homeowner in northern Japan surveys the destruction in his town.



A Fruit Tree Project volunteer uses magic tricks to entertain children at a shelter in northern Japan.

Another volunteer AKITA project, the Big Clean, has taken volunteers to the Iwate and Miyagi Prefecture regions to clean up some of the damage. But while Kocher said participants in both projects benefit from getting to know each other and forging connections for the future, the work isn't always enjoyable.

"The most frustrating part is seeing all the destruction and wondering if it will ever end. You get to an area, finish and feel accomplished—and then you realize there are millions upon millions of areas just like this all over the eastern region," said Kocher. "But we can't give up. When we finish cleaning and meet the extremely thankful people we've helped, I think we all realize this is bigger than many of us would have expected. It's a good job to do, and it's a job that needs

to be done."

Kocher is one of many Illinois Wesleyan alumni who now call Japan home, but according to International Office Director Stacey Shimizu, only one current IWU student spent an extended time period abroad in Japan this year. Dane Brinkmeier, '12, who studied for the academic year at Tokyo's Sophia University, returned to the United States for break just days before the earthquake hit.

"When I was home in March, I wasn't sure if I would be coming back to Japan," said Brinkmeier, an international studies major with a concentration in Asian studies. "My heart was going out to those who suffered in the tsunami."

Besides minor inconveniences like planned blackouts and power outages designed to conserve energy, Brinkmeier's international experience was not drastically affected by the events in March. "Tokyo is a good 250 miles from where the disaster hit," said Brinkmeier, who has been back in Japan since early April and plans to return to the United States in August. "I feel fortunate that I could return to Japan."

While not everyone in the IWU community was able to provide hands-on assistance in Japan this semester, those in Bloomington-Normal have also worked to contribute to relief efforts. On March 27 during their annual International Carnival (I-Carnival) at the Hansen Student Center, IWU's International Society student organization (I-Society) raised money for The American Red Cross Japan Fund. Although the main attractions were song and dance performances by IWU's international students, I-Society also raffled off a painting created on the spot by art major Katya Kobrina, '12.



More than 80 IWU students and faculty members attended Paper Cranes for Japan, held on April 4 in the Hansen Student Center.

Over the course of the evening, Kobrina painted Canadian band Crystal Castles' lead singer Alice Glass in accordance with the carnival's theme of international music. Guests were able to purchase raffle tickets for \$1 each, and International Student Advisor Reenie Bradley reported that between the raffle and outside donations, I-Society raised over \$200 to send to the Japan Fund.

In another on-campus fundraising effort, the Phi Beta Delta international studies honor society teamed up with Asian Studies students and the Japanese Studies Program on April 4 in the Hansen Student Center to host Paper Cranes for Japan. According to participating art major Becky Ebben, '14, folding paper cranes holds special traditional significance in the

country, where legend states that anyone who folds a thousand will be granted a wish from a crane, a “holy bird” believed to live for a thousand years.

The event gave participants a crash course in origami and asked for a monetary donation – \$1 for students and \$5 for faculty – for each crane they folded over the course of the evening, with proceeds benefiting the Japan Disaster Fund. For every crane folded, the Bezos Family Foundation also donated \$2 to Architecture for Humanity.



Over the course of the evening, participants folded over 1,500 paper cranes.

Participants signed their names and wrote “well wishes” on each crane they personally folded. The goal of the evening was to fold a thousand cranes, but by 9 p.m., participants had created more than 1,500. According to Assistant Professor of Religion Tao Jin, who teaches in Asian Studies, nearly \$300 was raised even before the Bezos Family Foundation’s additional contributions.

During the two-hour event, Emeritus Associate Professor of Physics Ray Wilson spoke about the dangers of nuclear radiation, and Professor of Anthropology Charles Springwood facilitated a Skype conversation with IWU alumnus David Leach, '89, who was teaching physics in the Fukushima Prefecture region when the earthquake struck. Leach and other Japanese locals shared eyewitness accounts of the destruction in Japan.

“It seemed to be an embodiment of the clichéd phrase ‘it’s a small world,’” said Ebben. “To talk with someone who attended IWU and is now experiencing first-hand the effects of a natural disaster on the other side of the world was not only an eye-opening experience, but also a great way to get involved in assisting those in Japan who need our help.”

Although the situation in Japan has faded from the media spotlight, the country is still struggling to rebuild. “Donating, I think, is the most important relief effort right now,” said Kocher. “Illinois Wesleyan has a great way of promoting service opportunities both on and off campus.”

With such a commitment to making a difference both locally and internationally, the IWU community has reflected an impressive capacity – shared by many in Japan – to always seek out the silver lining. “There are two new students at my elementary school, one from Miyagi and one from Fukushima,” said Kocher. “At first I was a little sad to see them there – just the idea that everything they owned was lost or unattainable due to radiation – but then I realized they must be happy to be here, safe in a loving community. Every downside definitely has a positive.”

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