

Hi, my name is Honoka MIURA, and today I have the great privilege to share with you my experience of life at the emergency shelter after the March 11<sup>th</sup> earthquake and tsunami. I would also like to share with you what I and other Junior Leaders did to help with reconstruction after the disaster and the ideas, hopes and dreams we have proposed to our mayor, Mr. Sato, for the future rebuilding of our town.

I became a Junior Leader in my first year of junior high school. Junior Leaders are junior and senior high school students who are supported by the Board of Education and do volunteer work under their supervision. For example, we get involved in Board activities for local children, provide administrative support for primary schoolchildren and help with local camping events and such.

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 I was at home because school was closed. Suddenly, I was surprised by huge shockwaves. I tried to go outside but I could hardly walk as the shockwaves grew bigger and bigger. Finally, I made it to the entrance and sat there. My father, who was outside, helped me get out of the house and we ran to a nearby hill.

When I looked to the ocean, I could see the bay receding - a sign that a tsunami is coming. I watched a ship owned by my father's friend being pulled out to sea and sunk. It seemed like a scene from a movie. Then my house was swallowed in an instant by the incoming tsunami. It was bigger than anyone expected. No matter how we tried to escape, it seemed to surge forward. It was snowing that day. The cold was numbing and we finally managed to get to a shelter in the nursery school on the hill.

We lived at the shelter for about two months. Our house had been swept away and our important possessions lost. We worried about our future, whether friends had survived, and whether our friends among the other Junior Leaders were safe. All we could do was to live each day; we felt helpless.

As the shock became less, I started to realize that the children at the shelter were all unhappy. No one was smiling, and I realized I had to help them. All the adults were afraid of the earthquake and had made a big fuss about it. The children sensed this, and it magnified their own fears. The children were unable to play, even if they wanted to. I thought they were suffering a lot.

It was then I began to think that I am the only one herewho can help these children. That's when I decided to be a Junior Leader at this shelter.

I made friends with the children quickly. We read books together, drew pictures, played cards, and practiced the hand-play songs that I had learned as a Junior Leader. Our possibilities for play were limited in the shelter, but the children clearly became happier even if we only sat together and talked. And I was happier just being with them. They started calling me "the

principal" each day we got together.

In mid-April, one month after the earthquake, we held a little concert. The members of the Board of Education made me the Master of Ceremonies. It was the children's first chance in a long time to perform songs and dance. They looked so very happy. The concert venue immediately became a sea of smiling faces. When their parents and others saw how happy the children were, they said: "This is the first time we've seen them smile in a long time!" It was then that we realized the power of a child's smile and wanted to make even more children happy.

My next thought was: "As Junior Leaders, can't I and others also do something to help the reconstruction of Minamisanriku-cho? Somehow, somehow, we wanted to revive our hometown that was struck so hard by this disaster." So we held a Workshop with the help of the people at World Vision Japan. Our goal was to find ways to include the views of Junior Leaders in the reconstruction of our town.

To help make this possible, we listened to the explanations of the reconstruction plans by local government officials. Then, we made a questionnaire about reconstruction and passed it out to all the schools in town, kindergarten to 12th grade. Then we held a Workshop based on the results.

During the Workshop, our theme emerged:

"How can we fulfill our town's dream and make our children cheerful again?"

One question was how to develop close relations with local people, regardless of age. With that in mind, we came up with the idea of creating a café in our Community Center. We thought many people, young and old, would use the café. They would communicate with one another. And the café would become a place that would create close personal links.

We had many other ideas. For example, we could make a park that children could play at. This park would also help keep our elderly from withdrawing from society. Also, because we all wanted to make our own town more disaster-resistant, we proposed to make a historical display in the town library, with a big map of evacuation shelters in town.

Finally, we summarized all of these ideas into a proposal. And in June last year, I handed it directly to Mr. Sato, our town mayor. The mayor said he would like all Junior Leaders to be partners in the reconstruction of Minamisanriku-cho. If even only small parts of this proposal are realized, I hope and pray it will make a better, safer and stronger Minamisanriku-cho.

The goal of the Junior Leaders is to remain active in the Community Center that we ourselves thought up. As Junior Leaders, we are proud to have been involved in the

reconstruction of our town. We feel rewarded to have been able to build good relationships with the children and to take part in town events. And we are genuinely happy that our ideas for the town have been used in proposals.

Honestly, in the beginning, I think there were many adults who thought it was foolish for Junior Leaders to have ideas about reconstruction. But we were able to follow through on our ideas to the end and we succeeded because adults helped us. So, please let us have a try before you say: "Youngsters can't do it." We can see things that adults can not see. It may take some time, but the results will certainly be new ways of looking at things. We want people to realize the amazing power of teenagers worldwide. That is what we came to realize through our activities.

Soon, two years will have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake. Much of the debris in town has been removed. The town's landscape has changed forever, but we have already gotten used to it. Many volunteers from throughout the world came to help us after the disaster, and many still come. We are very thankful for their help. But we cannot rely on volunteers forever. Volunteers will not build the new Minamisanriku-cho. Rebuilding our town is our job.

Thank you for listening to my story and letting me share with you our important Junior Leaders' goal:

"Fulfilling our town's dream and making our children cheerful again"

As Junior Leaders, we plan to deliver this goal and vision to the people of Minamisanriku and, working together as a community, **WE CAN, AND WE WILL**, make a new and better Minamisanriku.

Thank you very much!

どうもありがとうございました！