

Nurturing Leaders to “Create the Future”



Overseas university students and high school students from Tono City come together to exchange ideas, August 2017.

A local initiative to develop human resources in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake is winning national attention as a model for “regional revitalization.”

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TONO City, famous throughout Japan as a village of folk tales, is located in the southeastern part of Iwate Prefecture and has a population of approximately 28,000. Tono has the same kind of issues as many other regional cities, such as a declining birthrate, a high percentage of senior citizens and a declining population. In April 2014, a place for developing human resources called “Create the Future College in TONO” (hereafter, College) opened to address these issues.

Fuji Xerox Co., Ltd., which has its head office in Tokyo, established the College in collaboration with Tono City.

Kunishi Higuchi, office manager of the Innovative Revitalization Group, Fuji Xerox and representative director of the College, recalls events at the time. “The incentive to build the College arose in the aftermath of the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake of 2011. Along the Sanriku coast and other places where the damage caused by the tsunami was significant,

around 4,000 of our multifunction devices that had been delivered were swept away by the tsunami, and an urgent response was required.”

Seven staff members were dispatched from the company’s Innovative Revitalization Group to provide support on the ground, with one of the support bases being Tono City, situated inland about 30 km from the Sanriku coast.

“As our staff members assisted in the recovery, they listened to the stories told by the local people and understood they faced a huge challenge for the future of Tono City, which had escaped serious



Create the Future College in TONO is based in a renovated middle school that had fallen into disuse.

All photos: Courtesy of Fuji Xerox Co., Ltd.

People from all walks of life discuss the topic of “life after retirement” in Tono City, September 2017.

damage from the earthquake. Because there were no universities in or around Tono City and not many places to find work, the young people who would supposedly play a major role in the region in the years to come have to leave their hometowns to further their education or to find a job,” Higuchi explains.

Aside from supporting the recovery, Higuchi and his staff members came up with the idea of “Create the Future Camp in TONO.” The activity started the year after the earthquake disaster. Around fifty people, university students, researchers and company employees from within Iwate Prefecture and metropolitan areas as well as Tono City residents, gathered together in old farmhouses and other facilities in Tono City to freely discuss the future of the city using Fuji Xerox’s unique communication method.

“The goal was to find the real issues facing Tono and to come up with creative ideas for solving those issues through a free exchange of opinions by people with different backgrounds.

As the activity continued for just over a year, there was an increased understanding of the issues and also an increased desire to solve those issues among the local people. Through the cooperation of Tono City, the College, established in a disused middle school, became a reality.

At present, people from industries, government and academia, mainly local residents, have visited the College, and seven major programs in three categories of interaction, living and culture, and industry creation have been carried out.

There are training projects to identify issues, the principal objective of which is the development of regional leaders, and in three years since it opened, a cumulative total of about 14,000 people have studied at the College.

The major goal of the College is, through these programs, to discover and develop people who will lead regional revitalization, and get actual projects up and running.

In August 2016, the University of Tokyo Innovation Summer Program (TISP) was held at the College. In this program, students from the University of Tokyo and university students selected from



around the world lived with local high school students from Tono City, and together learned about the city, discovered its charms and generated ideas for regional revitalization.

“The College started as a part of Fuji Xerox’s reconstruction activity, but it was turned into a general incorporated association in the third year after its establishment, and our aim is sustainable management where we can become independent and not have to rely on temporary subsidies.

For that we above all need a relationship of trust with the people of the region who are contributing to its operation. In order to be able to continue our activities independently and to generate real results in the future, it will be even more important to expand paid programs.”

Around four years have passed since the opening of the College, and as the College becomes a deeply connected part of the local community, collaborations with different kinds of stakeholders other than Tono City have started to arise, thereby generating a set of common values.

The College has partnered with industries, government and academia on the concept of “learning through interaction” and will address broader issues including development of human resources, child-care support, area management and original industry creation in the future.

There are many other examples of addressing issues faced by the region, but the “Tono model” is raising people’s expectations and attention as it is proving that human resource development could open the way to the future. ■