

Preparing Future Generations for Another Disaster



Kikuchi Nodoka
Photo: Umezawa Akira

Kikuchi Nodoka works as a storyteller in Kamaishi City, Iwate Prefecture, explaining to visitors from Japan and around the world about her experience during the Great East Japan Earthquake that hit her hometown in 2011. She tells people how important it is to protect their own lives in a disaster.

UMEZAWA AKIRA

KIKUCHI Nodoka was a third-year student at Kamaishi Higashi Junior High School when the Great East Japan Earthquake struck on March 11, 2011. She and her classmates fled from the school into the surrounding hills to escape the surging sea as a siren continuously wailed across the area. They ran for their lives along with the students of the adjacent elementary school, with whom they had conducted regular evacuation drills to ensure they survived an emergency together. Kikuchi says she thought, “The tsunami will come soon after the shaking stops. I must evacuate to the surrounding hills as quickly as I can. As soon as this idea entered my mind, my body reacted, thanks to the routine emergency drills that I had experienced before.”

The Sanriku region, where Kamaishi City is located, has a history of significant seismic activity and devastating tsunami damage. In an attempt to prepare children for another disaster, the Kamaishi City Government has been promoting disaster management education. Kamaishi City was devastated by the tsunami, but 1,927 elementary schoolchildren and 999 junior high school students survived in the city, a survival rate of 99.8%.

Inspired by the high survival rate for schoolchildren in the disaster, Kikuchi later embarked on her career. “Many of the schoolchildren in the city survived the tsunami, but many others in other parts of the region died. I have come to realize that our generation must address regional disaster management issues



The newly established Inochi o Tsunagu Miraikan in Kamaishi City (left). Panels and pictures help to inform visitors about disaster preparedness (right)
Photos: Courtesy of Saijo Yoshiyasu / Grafica Inc.

seriously,” Kikuchi says.

As Kikuchi studied in high school and college, she kept asking herself how she could contribute to the promotion of regional disaster management activities. She thought about becoming a disaster medical assistance team nurse to help disaster victims or becoming a school teacher to educate children about disaster prevention. Both are important professions, but she felt that there was something else for her to do in her career.

In the spring of 2019, the Inochi o Tsunagu Miraikan was established in Kamaishi City as a center for disaster preparedness education, passing on the history of the disaster, and sharing stories and lessons learned from it. When she happened upon an ad recruiting staff for the facility on the web, she immediately applied, thinking, “this is it!”

Kikuchi says, “I was thinking all the time about how I could contribute to protecting the lives of people and helping the region while leveraging individual people’s insights and experience in the region. I realized that I wanted to pursue a career in gathering peers who are willing to work together in emergencies.”

Kikuchi works as a storyteller at the facility today,

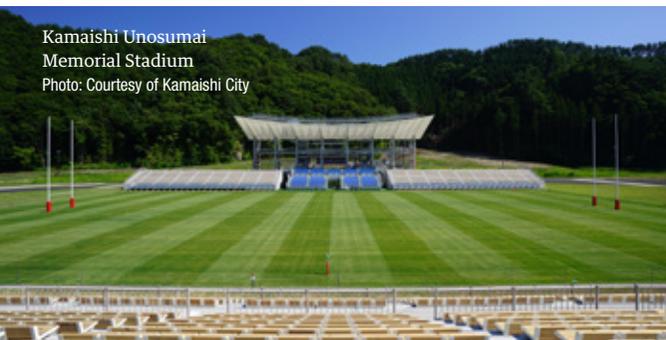
explaining to visitors about her disaster experience and disaster-prevention education with the aid of panels and pictures showing disaster damage. She has been invited to address audiences at conferences and symposiums focused on disaster prevention initiatives. Through these activities Kikuchi has been sharing lessons learned from the disaster with people across the country.

“Through a number of activities, I have built up a network of people engaged in regional disaster management activities across Japan. Going forward, I will stay active in passing the insights and expertise learned from my colleagues on to the youth in local communities,” says Kikuchi.

In the place where her high school used to stand, Kamaishi Unosumai Memorial Stadium has been built, which was used to host matches in the 2019 Rugby World Cup. A number of international rugby fans visited the Inochi o Tsunagu Miraikan before and after the games.

“I was so glad that so many people from around the world came to visit the facility. I was deeply touched when I saw visitors in tears at the exhibits as if they were also disaster victims.”

When asked about the challenges confronting disaster prevention, Kikuchi says without hesitation, “It’s indifference. You cannot forget the people who sacrificed their lives to save other citizens who were not prepared for the disaster. Quite a few of the tsunami victims included ordinary citizens with a keen interest in disaster prevention calling for evacuation as responsible members of local community organizations.” Indifference puts you and the people around you at risk. I will stay committed to local community development and make people realize the great importance of disaster prevention.”



Kamaishi Unosumai Memorial Stadium
Photo: Courtesy of Kamaishi City