

Not My Fault: A heartwarming story of something beautiful out of tragedy

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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This was a special week for Crescent City and Rikuzentakata. A delegation of twenty officials, business and civic leaders from Rikuzentakata arrived in Crescent City Sunday to meet Crescent City and Del Norte officials and tour Del Norte County. On Monday evening, a signing ceremony was held to declare their Sister City relationship official.

At first glance, this might not seem like a momentous event. There are at least 565 Sister City arrangements in California and the Crescent City – Rikuzentakata link is the 105th between California and Japan. Eureka has two Sister Cities – Nelson (New Zealand) and Kamisu (Japan) and Arcata has had a Sister City connection to Camoapa (Nicaragua) for 33 years.

There are a number of reasons that cities form partnerships. Called “town twinning,” the earliest examples come from Europe in the Middle Ages. The modern form of sister city-hood came after World War II and was promoted to foster friendships and bridge the culture gap between communities that had formerly been foes. Trade, tourism, business links and political solidarity are all reasons cited among current Sister City relationships.

The Crescent City – Rikuzentakata relationship is unique among the over 2000 connections listed by Sister Cities International, the group that tracks these partnerships. It is the only one that owes its existence to a tsunami, a boat and groups of extraordinary high school students on both sides of the Pacific.

The connection began on March 11, 2011 when a great earthquake occurred off the Northeast coast of the Japan island of Honshu. Rikuzentakata was about 60 miles from the epicenter and residents experienced shaking that lasted several minutes. About 25 minutes after the earthquake, the first tsunami surges arrived and swept over 80% of the city. The impacts were horrific. By the time the waters had receded, the entire downtown business district and civic center was destroyed along with more than half of the homes in the city of about 24,000 people. More than 2,000 residents lost their lives include 68 city officials. Everyone who survived had lost

loved ones – children, spouses, parents, neighbors, work associates, and friends.

The same tsunami traveled out across the Pacific and 9 ½ hours later reached Crescent City. Fortunately the tsunami was much smaller by the time it arrived on our coast and we had the advantage of hours of warning ahead of time. The EAS system was activated, sirens sounded, officials went door to door alerting people, and people were able to get out of harms way.

In 2011, when both Rikuzentakata and Crescent City were dealing with their own crises, neither realized that something else would connect them in a way neither had imagined. A small fiberglass boat was sitting in the dock area of Hirota Bay, along with dozens of other fishing boats. Hirota Bay is the harbor for Rikuzentakata and the area, like California’s North Coast, is famous for oysters and commercial fisheries. It belonged to Rikuzentakata’s only high school, Takata High, and was used to teach students how to dive and work in the harbor. The boat “Kamome” was not in use the Friday afternoon of the earthquake and was secured in the holding area of the harbor.

The 2011 tsunami reached over 40 feet high in Hirota Bay and all of the boats were swept into the ocean. Many crashed back on the coast in succeeding surges to become part of 15 million tons of debris to clog the beaches and coastline. But a few boats and other debris from the tsunami were carried far enough offshore to reach the North Pacific Gyre, the great current system that slowly rotates clockwise. Kamome was one of these and for more than two years bobbed in the ocean, accumulating her own barnacle ecosystem and slowly drifting west. On April 7, 2013, she reached the North Coast of California and gently landed at South Beach, Crescent City.

Kamome was at the heart of the presentations Monday evening as Rikuzentakata and Crescent City made their connection official. Presentations recounted the five years since that beaching – how a group of high schools students took it upon themselves to clean the boat and return it, how individuals, businesses, and even official bureaucrats assisted in the effort, the exchanges between students, a Sister School declaration and finally this week culminating in the Sister City commitment.

I was in Rikuzentakata six weeks after the tsunami and saw first hand its horrors. I saw Kamome the morning after she beached in Crescent City. I visited Rikuzentakata five days after Kamome returned home. I’ve met many of the high school students from both schools who have

participated in the exchange. This little boat and the kindness of people in both Crescent City and Rikuzentakata has brought something beautiful out of tragedy and I was so happy to bear witness. But the most important legacy of Kamome is yet to come, as people on both sides of Pacific continue to learn about each other and embrace how much we have in common. Becoming Sister Cities is a wonderful way to make this happen.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University and the coauthor of "The Extraordinary Voyage of Kamome," a bilingual children's book about the tsunami boat. Available in local bookstores and online at humboldt.edu/kamome. All proceeds from the book sales support the student exchange program. Teachers interested in obtaining a copy, leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu.

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