

Times Standard

Not My Fault: The lasting legacy of Kamome – friendship builds resilience

Lori Dengler for the Times-Standard

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My column often touches on tragedy and loss. But sometimes I've got a positive story to tell, a heartwarming one where sparks of hope, love, and kindness emerge from the ashes of tragedy. The tale of Kamome would never work in Hollywood. There are so many people and organizations going out of their way to be kind and helpful.

On April 7, 2013, a small boat beached just south of Crescent City. The boat Kamome was traced to Rikuzentakata, a small city in Japan that had been devastated in the 2011 tsunami and through the efforts of Del Norte High School students was returned to the Japanese high school that lost it (<https://kamome.humboldt.edu/>).

Over the last 11 years, the connection between Crescent city and Rikuzentakata has grown – first with student exchanges, then civic leaders. In 2018, the relationship was formalized through a Sister City agreement. The improbable flourishing of the Crescent City and Rikuzentakata friendship was featured in NBC's coverage of the 2021 Japan Olympic Games.

There are nearly 600 Sister City agreements in California. Eureka has connections with cities in New Zealand and Japan and Arcata celebrates their link to Camoapa, Nicaragua with the I Block Party every year. All Sister City relationships promote cultural and economic exchanges. The Crescent City – Rikuzentakata link is unique in putting school children and disaster resilience at its core.

Last year, Crescent City and Del Norte County hosted a one-day Kamome Festival to mark the ten-year anniversary of the boat's beaching. All students in Del Norte County schools put emergency kits together and participated in origami, fan folding and learning to write a few Japanese characters. Evening activities were open to the public and included the unveiling of a mural commemorating Kamome's journey.

Kudos to Del Norte County for continuing the tradition and building on last year's events. Kicking off the 2024 celebration, nearly 100 Del Norte residents greeted a delegation of Rikuzentakata officials at the county airport on April 11th. The following day was for kids. All county school children attended events at the Cultural Center and received copies of the new Living on Shaky Ground magazine to take home to their families.

It was a packed house for public events at the Cultural Center on April 13th. It began with an outdoor drum circle, followed by a Tolowa Di Nee retelling of an earthquake – tsunami story. That story is likely based on the great Cascadia earthquake in 1700 that was a bit like 2011 in reverse. The strong shaking and the largest tsunami waves were here on the northern California to southern British Columbia coast with smaller but still damaging tsunami surges arriving in Japan about ten hours later.

Cultural exchange was at the forefront in program featuring Hmong, Lao, and Latinex dancers and Humboldt Taiko. Taiko means drum in Japanese but now usually refers to choreographed ensemble drumming with the large wadaiko drums. If you have never seen a taiko performance, Humboldt Taiko is performing at the China Town Festival in Eureka on May 5th. It will energize your day.

Not all of the Rikuzentakata delegation's time was spent in public activities. There were meetings with civic organizations on economic cooperation. One afternoon was spent with the emergency management community exchanging approaches to disaster management and community resilience. Many of the connections built over the last decade have become true friendships.

The Crescent City – Rikuzentakata relationship would have never happened without the hard work by Amya Miller. Amya was my first contact back in 2013 when I posted pictures of Kamome on the Rikuzentakata Facebook page three days after the boat beached. She immediately recognized the significance of the boat and worked tirelessly to coordinate the boat's return and the first student exchanges. It is wonderful to see how her efforts have paid off and the Sister City relationship is now thriving on its own.

The Kamome Festival is a win – win – win event for everyone. It's a chance to educate the next generation about preparedness, respect for different cultures, and friendship. It's an opportunity for emergency response communities to learn from one another. As it grows

and becomes more widely known, it will become an economic win too, drawing people from out of the area to Crescent City.

I've studied earthquakes and tsunamis for more than half a century. The first decade was all science – classes in math and physics, learning the how-tos of research and presentations. When I came to Humboldt and experienced earthquakes, I began to see a bigger picture and not just graphs figures, and equations. My first post tsunami field reconnaissance in 1998 to Papua New Guinea changed by perspective forever. Science is important, but is only one part of what makes an earthquake or tsunami a disaster.

On Friday I received a Civic Contribution Award from the Humboldt League of Women's Voters. It was a surprise and an honor to be recognized for outreach work. But what resonated the most for me at the LWV's State of the Community Luncheon was Jennifer Savage's Keynote address. She talked about how communities need all of us to thrive. Her metaphor was a surfer's impact zone, where the crashing waves disorient and trigger fear for survival. Surfers look out for one another, offering a helping hand to people they don't know. It's important to recognize that helping hand and accept it when offered.

Disasters are the ultimate impact zone where everyone experiences disorientation and fear. For some it is much worse with grave injury and loss. I have seen it many times in the places I have visited after earthquakes and tsunamis. There are many factors that contribute to the severity of a disaster – the magnitude of the event, population exposed, nature of the built environment. But one is always important – the strength of the community before the event occurred. This is the most important piece in the pace of recovery.

Sociologists have a variety of ways to define community strength, but all include the ties between community members, a measure of how well connected we are. There are a variety of ties ranging from the more formal such as family, work, faith groups, volunteer organizations, to much more informal ones such as book clubs and dog walking groups. Such connections are not only important to individual well-being, but to community health as well.

The best way to survive the impact zone is to build connections – between individuals, organizations, and communities. When we connect, strangers become friends and their well-being become important to us. The great thing about connecting, it that it can also be really fun.

The lasting legacy of Kamome is that we are far more alike than we are different and that a stranger is just a friend you haven't met yet.

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