

Not My Fault: Kamome goes to the Olympics

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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The 32nd Olympiad has officially opened. One year late and beset with problems unforeseen eight years ago when the IOC awarded the 2020 Summer Olympic Games to Japan, it is likely to go down in history as the COVID Olympics.

In 2013, the successful host bid was seen as a symbol of recovery to a country hit by the most expensive natural disaster of all time. The March 2011 Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami provided a backdrop to Japan's host application and the country pulled out all the stops to illustrate how quickly the country bounced back. The real story was a bit different and for the hardest hit regions in Fukushima, Miyagi and Iwate Prefectures, the recovery was just beginning.

In April 2013, a small boat washed up in Crescent City. This was Kamome, the boat that would become a major part of my life. While the IOC was weighing host applications in the summer of 2013, I was making connections. Through a Facebook post, I met Amya Miller a special assistant to the City of Rikuzentakata. Amya, an American born in Japan, was helping the City communicate with international organizations and recognized the symbolic importance of Kamome. She connected it to Takata High School and worked tirelessly with the US Embassy, Japan officials and other organizations for the boat to be returned.

In October 2013, a month after the IOC announced Tokyo as the 2020 host and a week after the boat returned, I visited Rikuzentakata. The Olympics bid was on the news, but I paid little attention. I met Amya and she took me to meet Mayor Toba and briefed me on the recovery issues.

On the first day of that visit, Amya took me to a preschool. It was Halloween and she took great pleasure in introducing Japanese children to American holidays. Dressed as a witch, she brought a suitcase full of candy, read books and played games. These children, she explained, had only known the post-tsunami disaster world. Many had lost grandparents, parents or siblings and

had been displaced from homes. For them and for all of the people in the disaster zone, the tsunami was not over, and every day was a reminder of all that was lost. She wanted to bring a little joy into their lives.

That's when we hatched the idea of writing a children's book about the tough little boat that had survived the tsunami and returned home. By the time we published two years later, six Del Norte High School students had visited Rikuzentakata, and 14 Takata High students had been to Crescent City. That book is now available in eight languages and a Chinese version in the works (<https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/monographs/1/>).

I've written about Kamome many times in this space –the incredible voyage across the Pacific, the connections the boat made students and the Sister City connection between Rikuzentakata and Crescent City that was finalized in 2018. Last July, this column featured the NBC Sports documentary after it was released on PeacockTV, the NBC streaming service.

Just like the Games, the Kamome documentary will officially air one year later than planned. NBC always selects a story to highlight a special relationship between the host country and the United States. It was completed last year, but like the athletes, put on hold until this week. NBC Sports aired a preview last Wednesday and plans the network release for next Sunday*.

I've talked to several reporters this week about why the Kamome story is important and how the 2011 tsunami still plays a role in these Olympics. The torch relay traveled through the hardest hit areas and several tsunami survivors were selected as torch bearers. But the COVID crisis has largely taken focus away from the 2011 tsunami and the Kamome story may be one of the few direct reminders of the disaster during TV coverage.

The NBC Sports video is very well done and does a wonderful job of highlighting the economic and geographical similarities between Rikuzentakata and Crescent City. I love the interviews with people in both countries that illustrate how alike we are and the burgeoning relationship between the two cities. But there is one aspect of the Sister City relationship that is not fleshed out in the NBC story. Crescent City, California's North Coast and the entire Pacific Northwest share a similar geologic setting to Japan. The 2011 Great East Japan earthquake is an example of what will happen here.

It has happened before. In January 1700, a ~M9 earthquake ripped the Cascadia region from Humboldt

County to Vancouver Island producing ground shaking likely felt as far away as San Diego and Nebraska. The 1700 tsunami destroyed coastal villages of Native Peoples from Del Norte County to British Columbia. It traveled across the Pacific and Japanese written records describe damage along 600 miles of coastline. In 1700, Japan got the reverse dose of what we experienced in 2011. The Japanese called it an orphan tsunami – they didn't feel the earthquake and only experienced the tsunami suddenly striking the coast.

For Del Norte County officials, visits to Rikuzentakata opened their eyes to the Cascadia tsunami hazard. We had been talking about Cascadia hazards before 2011, but it took seeing what happened and the personal connection to people who had experienced it for many people to become believers. Perhaps the biggest dividend to come out of the Kamome connection is better prepared communities on our side of the Pacific.

*The airing of Kamome is scheduled for 8:30 PM PDT Thursday August 5th on NBC. The time may change depending upon event coverage and other news events. The documentary can also be viewed on NBC's PeacockTV streaming service. Information on how to access PeacockTV is at <https://rctwg.humboldt.edu/kamome-goes-olympic-games> along with other links as to the story of the boat, tsunami debris, the exchange, and Sister City relationship.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. The opinions expressed are hers and not the Times-Standard's. All Not My Fault columns are archived online at <https://kamome.humboldt.edu/resources> and may be reused for educational purposes. Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email rctwg@humboldt.edu for questions and comments about this column, or to request a free copy of the North Coast preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground."