Kinnick senior shares volunteer experience during trip to Sendai

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Two months ago, Sendai, Japan was hit with a 9.0 magnitude earthquake immediately followed by a disastrous tsunami that destroyed the whole city. Many countries started to gather volunteers to travel to the site and help the Japanese people. The whole world reacted rather quickly and aid was given to the survivors in a matter of hours.

I traveled to Sendai, Japan with other volunteers including fellow senior Nicco Rivas, from Commander Fleet Activities Yokosuka (CFAY) April 29 to May 1. I had no idea what to expect because all I had seen of the damage was on the news, but I knew that it would be devastating.

I rented my sleeping bag, boots, and rain jacket for the weekend and we all climbed into a rental van. The ride took 9 hours after we left CFAY at around 6 p.m. The closer we got to Sendai, the less cars and buildings we saw. I could start seeing the little traces of trash neatly piled up on the side of the road. Some buildings had tape to block people from entering and some buildings were completely ruined. We traveled deeper into Sendai until 3 a.m. when we reached a part of the city called Ishinoshima. The ironic thing is that as soon as we parked, all of our cell phones started to receive earthquake warnings.

I was dead tired and we all had to sleep in the car for the first night because it was too late to call the missionaries we were staying with. I woke up to the sun beaming on my face at 6 a.m. I got out of the van and cleaned up in a public restroom; I felt like a refugee. I was excited and nervous to go and start working. I put on my working boots and we drove to meet the missionaries. The two of them came and guided us through the messed up roads. One of the missionaries was half-Japanese named Tetsuro, who could speak Japanese well although he grew up in Australia. The other one was a Korean-American from Los Angeles named Jack, who seemed to have a positive, upbeat attitude. Our first task was to help an elderly man clean out his hardware store that had been taken over by the water and dirt from the tsunami. The actual building was still intact but all of his items were ruined by the dirt. We had taken the hardware items to a local water spigot and cleaned his supplies to salvage whatever could be sold. I learned later that he was not receiving any sort of insurance money for his store or the goods that had been damaged by the tsunami.

Later, all of us had gone back to an abandoned building that the missionaries were staying in to have lunch. I had brought food from home so I had a Starkist Lunch-To-Go. They gave me some bread so I could make myself a sandwich. The weather was colder than it was in Yokosuka so they let us use the kerosene heater. I then learned that they still had no electricity, but luckily they had running water. We quickly finished lunch and followed the missionaries to a church to help clean out the building. The building itself was still standing but the inside had trash that obviously didn't belong to the building. There were children's toys, books, and pictures piled into the church. As we were trying to fix the door to the building, the outer roof started to collapse and almost crushed one of our volunteers. This made me realize just how fragile and broken everything really was. We left the building in a hurry and the missionaries told us that they would take us out to show us the rest of the city.

The missionaries led us to the places in Sendai where the damage was absolutely overwhelming. There were no buildings anywhere to be seen and all of the trash was piled up on the side of the road. Tetsuro informed us that after the tsunami had hit, there was a fire that burnt most of what was left of the houses. As he said this, we drove by a pile of trash that had been completely burned out. The smell was horrible and I couldn't quit pinpoint what it smelt like. It was so overwhelming knowing that it would take years to rebuild this city. Although my help was in a minimal way, I'm hoping that somehow someone's life was changed. We drove by the water and the smell got worse. The smell of the ocean and the trash burnt my nostrils as we drove by.

I was hoping to work with victims and wanted to see how they were doing. Upon hearing this, Jack suggested that we go and see one of the shelters. As we arrived I could see that there were already so many people residing there. Jack told me that the city recently started school back up again but it was difficult because many families were still staying at the school and the gym, so going to school for the students was chaotic. We walked up a flight of stairs and were near the school gym where the victims were eating their boxed dinners. Most of the other volunteers couldn't bear to go inside to meet these survivors, but Nicco and I were curious. As we took our shoes off to enter the gym, I took a deep breath. I squeezed my way through the doors and my heart immediately dropped. The people living there had made make-shift rooms with cardboard boxes. Their blankets and belonging strung out everywhere, but yet, they were all smiling and laughing. They were the friendliest people I've ever met. Little kids swarmed around me as they asked me questions about who I was and why I was there. I gave them some candy and they thanked me graciously and ran off to play with their friends. There were volunteers from other organizations who were handing out clothing and toys. I walked around to observe what each family was doing and for the most part, it was normal. A mother was feeding her small child their dinner and another was reading their child a bedtime story. I felt like I was a stranger intruding in their home, so I left. When I told Jack that they were friendly and lively, he told me that they have spirit. They want to have someone new to talk to; someone who didn't experience the same tragedy. My mind was forever changed after those brief 10 minutes. It made me appreciate everything that I had and to never take anything for granted.

We returned to the abandoned building and the missionaries treated us to a spaghetti dinner. It was delicious and quite filling after a full day's work. The rest of the night was relaxing and we just sat inside and talked about our futures and what the future held for Sendai. I didn't want to leave, but it was time to go. We said our see-you-laters and gathered all of our gear. We packed up the van and hit the road. I wished I stayed longer because I felt like I didn't help enough. I can't wait to see how Sendai improves over the next couple of years.