

living with DISASTER



Text by Dr Grace Chew | Photos by Okayama Christian Disaster Response

Coming from a country with few natural disasters, the morning of 18 June 2018 was, without a doubt, one of the most terrifying moments of my life. The day started routinely enough, with me having breakfast at my table as usual. Out of the blue, my plate started rattling, boxes on my kitchen shelf fell off and I felt the floor sway beneath me. This was accompanied by the emergency warning system blaring “Earthquake! Earthquake!” from my mobile phone. Before I could gather my wits, everything stopped.

But things were far from safe since then. Following the Osaka earthquake, torrential rains in late June to July caused massive flooding in southwestern Japan, leaving a death toll of hundreds. This was followed by a heatwave that reached unprecedented temperatures of more than 40 degrees Celcius in many areas. And with August came the typhoon season, increasing the risk of mudslides at places already ravaged by the earlier floods.

While I felt lucky that my area did not suffer the full brunt of the damage, I was still filled with worry and unease as I followed the daily weather updates closely. After the flood waters receded, local organisations put up a call for volunteers to assist with disaster relief efforts. I have always believed that volunteering in a medical position was the most efficient way for me to contribute to society; but living here, where I do not speak the language well enough to function independently in many aspects of my life, and having received generous help from many

around me, I believe that every bit helps. So, I signed up as a volunteer without hesitation or expectations.

It was sweltering when I showed up at Kurashiki in Okayama. We drove to Miba, one of the worst hit areas in Kurashiki. Debris was piled nearly a storey high along the sides of the road. Heavy-duty trucks rumbled by, laden with rubbish and broken bits of houses. Periodically, helicopters roared across the sky. People were still missing. Pictures cannot fully capture the visceral impact of seeing a small town wasted in this manner.

As most of the houses still standing were uninhabitable, residents moved to evacuation centres and returned whenever they could to restore their homes. Local groups then reached out to residents in need of help with rebuilding or cleaning, and coordinated with volunteers to assist them. Many of these residents who requested for help were the

elderly who were unable to manage on their own. I joined a motley crew of seven other volunteers to visit Mdm A’s home.

Rebuilding in parts

Mdm A was a soft-spoken elderly lady who lived in a traditional Japanese house, where the floor was wood and the walls, paper. It did not resist the flood well. We did as much of the outdoor work as we could in the morning. This mostly involved removing wooden boards and housing materials that were soaked beyond repair. Many pieces of furniture, including her door, also had to go after sitting in flood water for weeks. In her modest backyard, Mdm A had grown some crops – none of which survived. Seven sacks of onions alone had to be discarded.

Over our lunch break, we chatted with Mdm A. This was when I found out that Okayama had been nicknamed



“the Land of Sunshine” because of its abundant sunshine for most of the year. Hence, having never experienced such a catastrophe in her life, she was still reeling from the flood. She was alone in restoring the house because her daughter was at the evacuation centre looking after her two grandchildren, one of whom has special needs. I could only imagine her sense of helplessness and devastation when she saw the damage, as she described how daunting it was to repair the house all by herself, especially at her age. That was why she signed up for volunteers to help with rebuilding her home and was very grateful for the response.

We remained indoors after lunch to avoid the scorching midday heat. Under Mdm A’s supervision, we sifted through her personal belongings and did our best to salvage items precious to her, which were mostly photographs. Although she had remained stoic the whole day, she broke into tears as she clutched her waterlogged wedding photographs. Those were the only two remaining photographs of her late husband, who had passed away many years ago. They had been taken before the era of digital photography and she did not have the negatives.



We continued sorting through the other photographs, and as I looked at the rest of her precious moments that we had laid out to dry, I felt that perhaps our lives were not too different after all. There they all were – pictures of family vacations, theme parks, birthday celebrations, piano recitals, scowling teenagers... These were the same pictures that I’ve taken at a different time and place. It was sobering to remember that anything can happen to anyone at any time, and we can never take life for granted. While it would take months for her home to be fully restored, I felt privileged to have had a glimpse into Mdm A’s life, and have helped to rebuild a small part of it. ♦

Legend

1. Rubbish piled up along the streets
2. The skeleton of a traditional wooden house
3. Sorting through broken bits of a house

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