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Japanese professor, students aid Sandy victims

New York
Seana K. Magee
KYODO

Just before Christmas nine volunteers — including Japanese university students based in the U.S. — donned suits, masks and gloves to rip down the walls of a hurricane damaged home, recalling how the catastrophic quake-tsunami disaster stuck their homeland almost two years ago.

"I am Japanese but I couldn't help out in Japan, so I was thrilled to be able to do something here," said Madoka Aramachi, a sophomore at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, New York City.

After hearing of the severity of Superstorm Sandy, which roared up the East Coast on Oct. 29 — killing 43 people in the Big Apple, including a fellow student — she was moved to pitch in. Her first outing was to the Rockaways, a hard hit coastal community in Queens, joining around a dozen other students Nov. 10 in assisting the local community.

Tomonori Nagano, an assistant professor at the college, encouraged students to help out, as she has done on three more occasions since the natural disaster.

On Aramachi's latest foray into the Rockaway Park neighborhood Dec. 23 on a sunny, crisp winter day, she worked side by side with her team to gut a basement that was flooded after waves from the nearby beach surged into the three-story home.

"I feel a sense of accomplishment," the 26-year-old liberal arts major said of her experiences.

During the three hour job at the first home they tackled, she worked alongside an 11-year-old boy still traumatized by riding out the superstorm with his mother, grandmother and their pets. From the second floor, the family watched the waters rise to their front fence and saw a raging fire spread for blocks across the street.

For Nagano, a driving force in rallying students to aid the storm's victims was her motiva-



Repaying a favor: Madoka Aramachi (second from right) and other Japanese volunteers prepare to help victims of Superstorm Sandy in the New York City borough of Queens on Dec. 23. KYODO

tion to repay Americans who helped his homeland in the aftermath of the March 2011 calamities. After tsunami ravaged Japan's northeast coast, Nagano organized a fundraising drive at the college, collecting nearly \$6,700 (¥575,000) over a four-day period.

"I was looking for the chance to pay back the community and I was thinking there should be some way to (do so)," the 37-year-old educator said.

Especially moving to him were the students, many of them struggling financially, who donated their hard-earned cash for people halfway across the globe.

"I think all of the Japanese student volunteers had similar feelings," Nagano explained. "We are indebted to the generosity of the local community (for their assistance) after 3/11 and we thought that we needed to show our gratitude in some way."

He didn't lose his home when Sandy tore through his neighborhood, as a fellow professor did, but 20 percent of the LaGuardia college's roughly 20,000 students were impacted and left stranded after massive transportation shutdowns.

When the New York City Marathon was canceled at the last minute, Nagano, an avid runner, missed the chance to enter what would have been his fourth run. But instead of being discouraged, he jogged nearly the length of the marathon that Sunday and informally joined other runners to help clear fallen trees from a city park.

While participating in the cleanup, he heard about the extensive damage in the Rockaways and decided to zero in on the district because it was located in the same borough as his college. With subway lines to the disaster area still down, it

took the group 90 minutes to get there by bus and car. They were assigned to clear gardens and basements.

Seeing the destruction up close, Nagano remembered the overriding desire to reach out to victims. "I wanted to encourage them, but it's the toughest thing to do," he said, remembering how shell-shocked they seemed.

For Kiichiro Ishikawa, a former LaGuardia student and the treasurer of the New York Japanese-American Lions Club, the opportunity to donate five hours of his time the Sunday before Christmas was just what he was looking for. "I wanted to give back something," the 28-year-old said. "(Working on the houses) is an important part of volunteering."

Nobuo Miki, an active member of the club who has helped out nine times, used his expertise to strip away metal and

drywall from a modest home's ceiling and walls, and tore down a bathroom so the tenants could rebuild almost two months later.

"People need manpower, I can help," the 51-year-old offered, explaining how the club's efforts — called Operation Tomodachi New York — were modeled after the Operation Tomodachi launched by U.S. forces stationed and outside in Japan to provide disaster relief in Tohoku. "New York people greatly helped Japan, so why shouldn't we help out with Sandy?"

During the club's drive to help victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake, Miki said he has never forgotten how even the homeless offered their "pennies, nickels and dimes" as donations.

Also on Dec. 23, Shuji Kato, an active Lions club member who has volunteered about 20 days to help hurricane victims citywide, led a Japanese team in clearing out another one of the approximately 200 homes for which New York Cares, a nonprofit organization, is currently charged with providing volunteers.

The work by Miki, Kato, Nagano and the students has not gone unnoticed by Seth Shapiro, the NPO's disaster relief manager. "They have been really persistent and hardworking and are among our most reliable volunteers that we and the community really appreciate," he explained of the Japanese contingent.

Despite witnessing the enormous damage the superstorm inflicted on the quiet beach side community, Nagano has been uplifted by how selflessly strangers have tried to aid the Queens' victims. It was another example, he said, of how people around the world "unite as human beings" to confront natural disasters, whether they are in Japan, Haiti or New York.

"I hope that we (the Japanese community) were able to show the same spirit this time," Nagano said. "I hope the spirit of compassion among citizens of different nations continues to grow."