

# Japan and Canada's cooperation in activities supporting disaster area in Japan

—The Richmond International Student Program for Japan's tsunami devastated areas—

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## Introduction

On March 11, 2011, Japan was hit by a 9.0-magnitude earthquake that triggered a deadly tsunami in the north of the country. The tsunami deluged cities and rural areas alike, sweeping away cars, homes, buildings, a train, and boats, leaving a path of death and devastation in its wake. There was not a train or a bus running in its aftermath. There was no fresh water or electricity and gas lines were cut off. Telephone communications became jammed. More than 20,000 people were dead or missing.

Fortunately, the disaster generated an outpouring of support from individuals, organizations and countries. Canada was among the countries that offered both moral and financial support for the disaster area. On March 26, 2012, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper traveled to the coastal area of Japan, near Miyagi, to tour one of the areas heavily impacted by the earthquake and tsunami. Prime Minister Harper visited a local hilltop shrine to convey Canada's sympathies to the victims, and to all those affected by the disaster(Fig.1). He also visited a junior high school in the devastated coastal town of Yuriage where he paid respects to the 14 students and more than 20 parents who lost their lives and was heartened to learn of the surviving students' recent graduation ceremony at a neighboring school.



Fig.1 Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper traveled to the coastal area of Japan (Nikkei Frazer,2012)

One of the effects of the tsunami, and one that has practical implications for Canada, is the immeasurable amount of debris that was swept into the Pacific Ocean. Although most

of the debris has sunk, many of the pieces are still floating in the Pacific, carried along by the ocean's currents. In fact, on the coast of Vancouver Island, debris that originated in Japan has already washed ashore<sup>1)</sup> (Fig.2). This has facilitated another rallying point for Canada's support of Japan's disaster-stricken region. It was reported in the newspaper that more than 700 volunteers have signed up for the Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup's tsunami debris registry<sup>2)</sup> (Fig.3). Planning ahead, the Maritime Museum of British Columbia has developed a project that aims to collect photos of flotsam that has washed ashore in Canada.



Fig.2 A Harley-Davidson motorcycle was swept ashore by the tsunami and was discovered on the West Coast of B.C. in March 2012.



Fig.3 The devastating tsunami in Japan on March 11, 2011 swept untold tons of debris into the Pacific ocean.

Another way in which Canada has showed its support is in its ratification of the Hague Convention, which protects children from unhealthy conditions in disaster areas. According to the official toll, the disaster left about 240 children with parents who were dead or missing. In Canada, it is policy that children, including orphans, should be brought up in a family, and so the Canadian government has appealed to the public (via a public website, publications for ethnic Japanese in Canada, etc.) to encourage international adoption. (Fig.4).

As stated above, Canada has committed its support to the disaster area of Japan in many ways. I was blessed with the chance to meet Mr. Shaun Sephton (Fig.5), the manager of the Richmond School District No. 38 (Fig.6), International Student Programs' "Cheering for Tohoku" program. The program aims to aid and encourage students suffering in the worst hit areas in northern Japan by inviting them to stay and study in Richmond. I will report on how the project started, how it is progressing, what its policy is and how help has been implemented.



Fig.4 International Adoptions: About 2,000 foreign children are adopted by citizens or permanent residents of Canada every year. Citizenship and Immigration Canada works to deal with applications for permanent residence or citizenship made on behalf of adopted children as quickly as possible. However, international adoption can be a long process.

## 1. The Project's Development

How has the project developed since the earthquake occurred? According to Mr. Sephton, the idea for the project occurred to him in the following way (transcribed in italics from a recorded interview):

*I woke up to go to work on March 11, but I didn't see the news. My wife had stayed awake all night watching NHK News but I didn't know to what extent the disaster had taken. (My wife is from Iwate Prefecture and I had lived there myself for many years.) I had to go to work. We have Japanese students in our program and I had to go to work and support them. But as I was going to work I heard the news on the radio and when I arrived, everybody asked, "Shaun, is everything ok?" Of course, we had some Japanese students that didn't know anything. When they got to school, everyone began asking, "Are you okay? How are your parents?" At least one of the students answered, "umm...my parents are fine, why?" When he was told what had happened, he was shocked and sad.*

*At that time the focus was on supporting the students here, but as we started thinking about it, my colleagues suggested that we help students in Japan come here, but my thinking was that nobody would—at least at that time. The disaster had just occurred and everyone was still in shock. Everything was gone and it would take a long time for people to understand what had happened. Their children were gone, husbands were gone, their houses were gone, so no one could say "okay let's go!" They would stay and help. They had to stay there. Of course, I understand. But after about two months, the chaos had subsided and people started to think, "Okay, now we have to rebuild. The shock is gone.*

*Now we have to work to fix things." I mention all this because it was at this point that the idea for our program took root.*

*It was a matter of timing. The idea to bring students here was good, but it couldn't happen too soon after the disaster. Nobody could think of leaving. But after the shock had subsided, I think people in Tohoku were saying, "Okay, we have to live; we have to move forward." So we thought this program could help students get away from seeing the devastation, from having to see and remember the carnage on a daily basis. Maybe, we thought, for two weeks or a month, they can come here and leave their worries behind—to just be away and have fun, make a friend, learn English, and not have to worry about radiation or anything. If you remember Chernobyl—every year there were many students that came from that area to Canada during the summer for one or two months as part of their recovery. They were exposed to radiation constantly at home, but during their time in Canada, these students could decontaminate their systems and lower the radiation levels in their bodies. They could drink water without worrying about radiation. They could improve physical health as well as their mental and emotional wellbeing. They could just have fun, so that's why I think that program is still going. I think students from Chernobyl may still go to Ontario every summer, so I thought this might be a good opportunity for Tohoku students and parents too. They can just come with their kids and relax.*

*So, we invited anyone from the affected areas of Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima, that had suffered the effects of the earthquake, tsunami, and radiation, to join our program. We don't ask them "how much are you suffering? How bad is your situation? Did you lose a mother or father?" We don't say that. There is no judgment on our part. We're not going to say that anyone has a bigger problem than anyone else and then decide who will come and who won't. We won't say that. But we hope that people understand the spirit in which the program operates, and if they can come, and if they think we can help, then great. So that's why we started the program.*

In the midst of a devastating crisis like the most recent earthquake in Japan, it is nearly impossible for affected people to think calmly and to organize solutions. The focus is on immediate survival and recovery of victims. A level-headedness is what is needed, but that would take time to achieve after such a disaster. The conversation with Shaun illustrated just that kind of level-headed thinking and sensible planning that has resulted in his Richmond International Student Programs.



Fig.5 Mr. Shaun Sephton(left), the manager of the Richmond School District No. 38.



Fig.6 The building of the Richmond School District No. 38

It's often a challenge to launch new projects; there are many aspects to consider. "Why do we have to help only Japan?" for example. "There has been an earthquake in Haiti, flooding in Thailand... many disasters around the world." What other challenges have come up during this process and how have they been solved?

*And so that was a challenge. One thing was that people were wondering if [our support of the tsunami victims] was only because of my connection to Japan, and the answer to that was that we would put some money aside. We should have more money to put aside to help other countries—we shouldn't just do this for Japan. We should help other places too. So we should do that. A second thing was that I have many connections in Japan – business and personal—in those affected areas, so it is easier for us to help those people and to at least let them know we're there.*

*Thirdly, it's easier for Japanese students to get visas or flights to Canada, whereas it is much more difficult for students from other parts of the world to go abroad. We cannot do it all. Maybe this can be a model to help us move forward in other ways. Of course because of my connections to Japan, I want that. All-in-all, it has allowed us to move ahead quickly.*

Sephton's words indicate an empathy with our sadness and a strong, passionate interest in rebuilding after the earthquake that has led to the implementation of a project that requires motivation and energy. We very much appreciate that Mr. Sephton has, over the years, established an ongoing relationship with Japan which has deepened the ties between the two countries. This means that when a crisis occurs, like the recent disaster,

there are relationships already in place.

## 2. Content Fund Performance

The project is funded by the Richmond school district for tuition, medical insurance and homestay costs for students coming to Canada. In addition to this, there are generous support from and Japan Airlines in Richmond and Student Guard Insurance. For example, JAL can provide favourable airfare from Japan to Vancouver, particularly if there is a group of 10 or more.

So far, 10 students have come. One student came from Fukushima for two weeks. Now, they are preparing to accept three students in September 2012 and six students in January 2013.

## 3. Policy

The sole purpose of the program is only to help and not for advertising purposes or for any kind of self-promotion. They are looking for nothing in return. In Mr. Sephton's words, the policy of this project is:

*...to just try to help, and that's it. We have nothing on our website, nothing in the newspaper, nothing like that. We did have a chance to do an interview with a newspaper up in Iwate, but at that time I was driving home. My friend, at the Sumita board of education, called me on my cell phone, but it was winter, it was dark, I was driving, and there was snow on the ground and I didn't want to do an interview right then and there. I said, "I can do it in Japanese, but I need time. I can't drive and talk. So send questions and I'll think of answers, and I'll practice first." But, that was all. It really has just been word of mouth. The spirit of what we're trying to do is help. That's all! Just help. Nothing more, And of course we're happy if the students are happy and their parents are happy. Maybe they'll read about this and maybe for a few seconds they'll think, "oh, isn't that nice." And then they turn the page. May be they'll only think about it for a short time—that's okay. That makes us happy."*

*Our goal is to help. Period. That's it. Nothing comes back. We aren't looking for anything. We're not asking for advertising or anything. We just want to help. Period. That's it. It's not political. It's not about pictures. It's not about anything like that. I didn't want to spend the time to try and help get all these other*

*organizations to come on board because I didn't feel we had enough time to wait. That's another challenge—people saying, “oh, it makes you feel good, right? That's why you're doing this, isn't it? That's your motivation.” And I think sometimes people are like that with charity at times. They live their lives, give to charity, and don't think. That's not how we feel. When I go and I see what has happened, it makes me sad. I choke up. I cry. It's a sad thing. It's terrible, especially because I've been there. I lived there and I've been to Rikuzentakada. I don't know how many times I've been to Ofunato or Kesenuma. I've been there so many times. And just to see it devastated is so sad. Yeah, of course, I feel that I want to help. It makes me feel like I'm trying to do something positive to help others. My wife and her friends and I have raised on our own money in the community where we live—I don't know, ten or fifteen thousand dollars—which we sent to the region. Okay. That's great, but \$10,000 doesn't help much, really. But people want to try to do something. So yes, of course it's a nice gesture. It makes us feel good that we can try to help. But that's not the motivation. The motivation is just to help. I know that this type of program can help students and their parents.*

The spirit of the project is inclusion and non-judgment. All are welcome and the degree of need is not part of the project's policy. Its philosophy is the same as its goal—to simply help without the need for self-promotion or financial return. There is nothing on their website or in any newspaper, just word-of-mouth between like-minded people who are willing to help.

#### 4. Problems in the future

Mr. Sephton insists that the problem for the future is to clear the contents of support—what, when and how many are helped—and to continue support for a long time. He stressed the following two points:

*The Japan Red Cross is very good, but not all the [donated] money goes to help, and they decide who, when and how much money goes to help. A significant portion of donations are kept for administrative costs. But I'd like to stress that they are a very good organization. My wife and her friends —that's where they sent the money they had raised. But, I said, “No, you can give it to me. I can take it directly. I go to Japan twice a year on business. I can take the money right to Miyagi, Fukushima and Iwate and give 100% of it to the victims.” The Japan Red*

*Cross is very good—a big name. They could use the reputation of the Japan Red Cross and Red Cross Canada would let them use their logo. So while we're raising money, my wife could assure donors that all money is in good hands."*

*So people, when they donate, may feel more comfortable donating to a recognized institution. So, it's still very good and I'm not complaining, and they have helped many communities around the world, but that's not the motivation. Anyway, that's the challenge. But, if we could....maybe there's a school we can help somehow...it would be wonderful if we could do that.*

*And so, those are challenges and of course, moving forward, it would be wonderful if we could sponsor a school or something, or help rebuild a school. Maybe we can send English books or the students can come to visit us, or we can buy knapsacks or something to help rebuild. This program is good, but to have a legacy...I've been trying with my friends in Japan to create a non-profit company where we could raise money – not just now, but always. To create a legacy.*

As above, he emphasizes that it is important to clarify the details around the donated funds—what, when, for whom and how much of the money is used for helping victims directly, something that is often difficult for big organizations. He also has the idea to establish an NPO so that support can be provided not only in the immediate aftermath of disaster, but long term as well.

According to Tominaga (2011), stress management has five stages: First, we have to secure personal safety and basic infrastructure such as water, food, transportation and medical services. Having these environments establishes a sense of security and peace of mind. A feeling of connection to others is critical.

Second, control of the physical stress such as neck pain, back pain, stiff shoulders and sleep disorders as well as the psychological effects of stress such as flashbacks, nightmares, and children's re-enactment of the trauma during play is important. We need to accept these situations and behaviors as natural responses to shock.

Third, it is important that schools re-open and life gets back to normal. However, some children suffer from survivor guilt, so adults must encourage children to enjoy their lives. In school and at home, teachers and parents should also provide disaster preparedness education.

Fourth, students begin to talk about their experiences. Spontaneous story telling is good—controlled de-briefing is not. Students must be given the space and freedom to tell their stories. It is important for adults not to perpetuate taboos around talking about bad



events. In this stage, students need to talk about positive experiences, for example, experiences they may have had helping others during the crisis. While students have had both positive and negative experiences, in the fourth stage they are encouraged to speak only about the positive.

In fifth stage, students are encouraged to confront and express their traumatic experiences and feelings of loss and sadness.

We have to recognize which stage student are in. They need to relax and be protected from radiation exposure during the first two stages. It is now more than a year after the earthquake and students might be in stage four or five, although each student progresses differently. Going to Vancouver is the primary purpose in stage two or three, but the ultimate goal is to address what they do during stage four or five. On the basis of the stages mentioned above, students visiting Vancouver can use their time away from Japan to engage further in their healing. Storytelling can be a healing mechanism for them. To have their experiences listened to with interest and sensitivity can provide them with a meaningful environment for recovery.

How will the valuable experience this project provides stay with the students? What influence will it have on their lives? The answers are what give meaning to this project. We have to be mindful of this for a long time while watching over the students fondly. I would like to express my appreciation to the Richmond school district and to Mr. Shaun Sephton for creating the project.

- 1) A Harley-Davidson motorcycle was swept ashore by the tsunami and was discovered on the West Coast of B.C. in March 2012. This was a miracle! The owner, whose home and family members were lost in the tsunami and who now lives in temporary accommodation, was very thankful that Canadians had tracked him down and returned his motorcycle to him. "Thanks for coming back buddy," he expressed emotionally, and with much gratitude to Canada.
- 2) Most has sunk, but many of the buoyant bits are still floating, in the middle of the Pacific, caught in the ocean's currents. Those currents are slowly sweeping debris from the tsunami towards the shores of the United States and Canada. Already, we are seeing some debris with Japanese origins wash up on the shores of Vancouver Island, although the majority of the debris is not calculated to hit our coast until 2013-2014. Planning ahead, the MMBC has developed a project that aims to collect photos of flotsam that has washed ashore. A Facebook site has been launched that will allow users to upload photos of bits that are found along the beaches. Moderators at the museum will attempt to determine the origin of debris, assess any potential value and place photos of the

objects on the site. In some cases where an object has been collected from the beach it may be able to be returned to its owner.

#### Acknowledgment

With the passage of time our empathy for those who have experienced the trauma caused by the earthquake and resulting tsunami seems to be cooling off in many cases, so it was a pleasure for the people of Japan to experience Mr. Sephton's passion for the ongoing support of the victims as well as his unwaning sympathy for their suffering.

I wish to thank Mr. Sephton, manager of the Richmond school district in Canada. During my interview with him, I felt his enthusiasm and empathy for Japanese fill my heart with gratitude. I am also grateful to Ms. Fusae Harada and Mr. Yoshitaka Matsubara for their support during the course of this interview.