



Filming a documentary about the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami



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Location: Tōhoku, Japan

On March 11th, 2011, a 9.1 magnitude earthquake struck the Tōhoku region of Japan. A tsunami followed, reaching a height of 17 meters in some places. This wave took nearly 20,000 lives and washed away entire communities along the coast. Eight years later, a few surviving structures have been maintained as monuments to the dead and as reminders of the sea's destructive power. Areas that were once seaside villages or bustling city centers are now mostly vacant, with cranes and construction equipment promising future development. Residential structures have been rebuilt on higher ground. Newly constructed seawalls line the coast for miles in hope of preventing future tragedies.

Project Information

I filmed five interviews with community volunteers and employees at non-governmental agencies and social welfare offices, including:

- An “active listening” volunteer in Shibamata, Tokyo
- Eight board members of an “active listening” organization in Sendai, Miyagi
- A mother who organized a memorial to her son and thirteen of his classmates who lost their lives in the tsunami in Natori, Miyagi
- The sole employee of a non-governmental organization that assists elderly and remote fishermen in selling their products at the regional fish market in Kesenuma, Miyagi
- Employees of the municipal social welfare office in Miyako, Iwate

In addition to the above interviews, I participated in guided and self-guided tours of tsunami-related sites in Sendai, Kesenuma and Miyako.

Outcomes

I collected several hours of footage in Japan. I plan to shape this footage into a documentary about the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, the subsequent mental health effects and ongoing recovery efforts in the affected communities. I am currently writing a script for this documentary and I plan to record narration and assemble a cut of the film before the end of the semester. Before my trip, I completed a literature review of the current research on this event. During the trip, I journaled extensively. Both of these documents will be used to inform my final project.

Skills Utilized/Developed

- **Engagement:** conducting these interviews required clinical listening and engagement skills
- **Reflection:** I kept a journal during my trip and wrote about both the content of my day and how it made me feel
- **Critical Thinking:** I reviewed a large amount of research before my trip. I had to consider what biases authors brought to their work and what might be left unsaid in the research

Classroom Connections

- **SW 522 – Basic Social Work Research:** prepared me to think about ethical concerns when conducting interviews and entering communities
- **SW 606 – Mental Health and Mental Disorders in Adulthood:** I learned about mental health in a Japanese context through an assigned paper on culturally-specific mental disorders

Lessons Learned

“Active listening” (keicho in Japanese) volunteers are trained to sit attentively and non-judgementally as other people speak. This practice has not been widely written about in English-language publications. By meeting with “active listening” volunteers, I learned about differences and similarities between the Japanese and American mental health systems and the social issues of most concern in Japan.



Career Connections

I hope to continue producing videos and documentaries throughout my social work career. I believe it is important to communicate research and ideas directly to the general public through a variety of accessible, digital channels. This has been my first experience with video production, and I learned a lot, from where to place the camera to how to tell a story.

Advice

- **Plan ahead:** try to figure out as many details as you can before you arrive in the country
- **Be flexible:** know which parts of the project must happen and which can fall aside
- **Don't give up:** don't be discouraged if you don't hear back from a potential contact; keep trying

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Map credit: T. Kambayashi