

Field Notes of Volunteer Work in Iwanuma

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I met up with my team on the 28th and drove up to Sendai, in Miyagi Prefecture. We spent the night at the hostel there and reported to the Volunteer Center in Iwanuma early the next morning. It's currently Golden Week in Japan--an extended holiday, and people from all over the country have swarmed to Tohoku to volunteer. We knew this would be the case and lined up early to get out assignments.

My team is awesome. I was a bit worried because I put the team together through Facebook, without ever meeting the other members in person. But everyone has been great. Generous, cooperative, hard-working, and fun to be with. K, a Japanese friend from college, also joined us. And all of the other volunteers in Iwanuma have been welcoming and friendly. I wasn't sure how people would react to a team of foreigners, but everyone welcomes us with open arms, shares food and information with us, and thanks us for coming.

The experience has been indescribable. There is so much to write and I won't have time right now but here are some of the highlights. The tsunami damage is horrifying. There are swaths of land covered in mud and straw (from rice fields) and full of debris, rubble, furniture, cars, boats, uprooted trees, everything. In Iwanuma, much of the larger refuse such as cars and boats have been cleared, but they remain in some areas we have driven through. Sometimes you see just the rooftop of a house on top of a car, etc.

There is a layer of sludge and straw on top of everything. It contains contaminants and must be cleared, one shovelful at a time. Roads and public areas are cleared by the SDF, but people's gardens, greenhouses, homes, etc must be cleared by hand. It's very heavy work and the scope of the work is daunting, but there are many people helping, and during Golden Week there are so many volunteers that hundreds are turned away every day. Not

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because there isn't enough work, but because the volunteer centers have a limited number of vans and drivers and supplies. After the sludge is cleared, it will be three years before the land can be used again for edible crops. Nearly all of the vegetation has been wiped out. Some small evergreen shrubs seem to have survived, as well as daffodils and onions. I brought a big bag of flower seeds donated from Portland Nursery, and the VC has promised to put them to use.

Many of the volunteers sleep in cars or vans parked in the VC parking lot, or in tents in a nearby park. Some have been here for several weeks and have developed relationships with local residents. These volunteers coordinate their own teams to do unofficial projects without going through the VC, and we have joined them for the past few days after being turned away at the VC. Today and yesterday, our team helped clean up a cemetery. The whole place was covered in mud, straw, and refuse. Some of the tombstones were knocked over, as were the cups and dishes people leave as offerings for their loved ones. While we were there working, people from the community came to visit the graves and place flowers there. We cleared the mud out of the corridors and central building where people offer incense. We were told not to clear the grave sites, as those belong to individuals.

The evacuees in Iwanuma seem to be doing fairly well. Their temporary housing units are up, and the children play in the park where the volunteers camp. They have new bicycles and fanny packs and seem to be getting enough to eat. But we hear that things are different in Watari, the next town over. Ken drove down this morning to donate some supplies he had brought in his truck. At the Watari Kouminkan, which serves as the distribution center, he was told that they had enough supplies and they would not accept the things he had brought. There were boxes of supplies piled high in their warehouse. But when he visited the individual shelters and spoke with people there, they said they were only getting two meals a day, with only rice or bread in the morning. They were extremely appreciative when he offered them the food, diapers, sanitary products, etc that he had brought. Apparently, there is red tape that causes the supplies to bottleneck at the Kouminkan, because they must be well documented and distributed "fairly," which is preventing enough supplies from reaching those who need them.

Meanwhile, at the VC in Iwanuma, volunteers are driven to work sites, shovel mud for a two hour shift, and return to the VC. There is a morning shift and an afternoon shift. Volunteers from restaurants (sometimes from other prefectures) have set up booths where they provide free soup or noodles for the volunteers, and there are tables set up with beverages and snacks that have been donated. The VC also passes out toothbrush sets and radios for those staying in tents and vehicles. When we return from a mud shoveling shift, there is a team with power washers who hose down our boots and tools. While we were waiting for the next shift, one of the VC staff offered us

Hagen Daas ice cream cups. And whenever we work at someone's house shoveling mud, the homeowners come out at break time with cans of coffee and snacks for the team. But we have not lost our homes, jobs, and loved ones. We could do just fine without free noodles, coffee, and ice cream. It's very hard for me to understand why supplies are being held up in a warehouse in Watari to ensure "fairness."

Over the weekend, our friend A. drove in from Fukushima and joined the team for an afternoon of mud shoveling, then drove back to Fukushima that night. K. and I hadn't seen A. in 10 years and had been worried sick about him when the earthquake and tsunami struck, and when the nuclear accident was at its peak. We were so happy to see him. When A. returned to Fukushima and told people he had been to Iwanuma, they asked him, "Did anyone throw rocks at you?" Since the nuclear accident, people from Fukushima are sometimes ostracized when they leave the prefecture. Children of evacuees from Fukushima are sometimes bullied in school, and when residents from Fukushima evacuated the area during the nuclear meltdown, they were turned away from evacuation centers and hotels if they didn't have a certificate that proved that they were contamination free. But many shelters don't have Geiger counters, so people who lost their homes and everything they owned were then turned away when they sought refuge. A. worried that his presence might dampen other volunteers' spirits when they learned he was from Fukushima and has been hesitant to join us again in Iwanuma on his next day off.

We finished up our last day of volunteering in Iwanuma yesterday, cleaning up homes and fields in the residential neighborhood not far from the graveyard we'd cleared earlier.

On the way to the work sites, there were areas where the Self Defense Forces still hadn't cleared large rubble like cars and boats. The most shocking was a small pile of cars the tsunami had deposited near a building. There was also a huge mass of rubber tires that had been deposited in a field.

As we worked in the residential neighborhood, more and more neighbors emerged from their homes and asked for help. Some had had their homes cleared by volunteer teams organized by the Iwanuma VC, but were then told that they were ineligible to request a team to clear their fields or gardens because they had already been helped once. The task of clearing a small field of sludge would be daunting for families or individuals, but with a team of thirty or more people, the work moves quickly and it is very satisfying to see all of the sludge cleared in an hour or so. We pile it up near the street, and later a dump truck and power shovel will come to remove it.

We wear masks, boots, and gloves to protect ourselves from the dust. Some volunteers also wear goggles and helmets, but most of us chose not to bother.

Metal insoles are recommended to prevent nails from puncturing the soles of your boots, but for most of the work we've been doing this hasn't been too much of an issue. The weather has been sunny for the past few days and the masks are uncomfortable, but if you take them off the dust hurts your throat. The sludge is easiest to remove when it's not too wet and not too dry, and congeals in a sort of chunky layer on top of the soil. Too wet and it becomes very heavy to shovel, too dry and it becomes crumbly and raises dust. The more time passes, the more it will dry out and crumble, and the dust will spread and become hard to remove. Conditions for sludge removal are really ideal at the moment, but in a few weeks the rainy season will come, followed by the summer heat. For these and other reasons, the quicker the sludge can be removed, the better.

At first the volunteer center gave instructions not to volunteer directly in the community without coordination by the VC. Our volunteer insurance won't work if we don't go through the VC, and doing things through official channels is generally a high priority in Japan. But during Golden Week, there have been around 800 or more volunteers gathered at the volunteer center. The VC assigns work to around 200-300 in the morning and around 200-300 in the afternoon, and the groups only work for 2 hour shifts. Given the situation and the high need for help in the community, more and more independent teams like the one we joined have begun collaborating directly with local households and groups. At first we were anxious about subverting the rules, but we soon realized that although the VC wasn't directly sanctioning such activities, they were happy to look the other way. And on the last two days of our activities, they actually officially began communicating with the individual teams and including our activities in the reports on their website. So on Tuesday, the VC dispatched 242 volunteers in the morning and 242 in the afternoon, while 320 participated in self-organized groups. Having participated in both, I think self-organized groups are actually much more effective because many of the same members work together day after day and become organized and efficient at sharing the labor. We also work from 9 until 3:30, with hourly short breaks and a one-hour break for lunch on site at 12. It doesn't sound like much, but we get a lot done.

After working with the self-organized group for four days, we really felt like a team by the end. We exchanged contact info and took pictures. The team was especially appreciative that our international group had come to help. I felt like our presence meant more than simply the work we were able to contribute--it represented to the volunteers and the tsunami victims the goodwill of outsiders towards Japan, and that seemed to mean a lot to people. Even though our contribution was small, it felt significant to me and I felt really honored and privileged to have the opportunity to participate. I was sad to go, but I have a deadline coming up in a few days and needed to get back to Internet access.

My teammates all plan to come back again soon to do more work. I hope to have the opportunity to do the same.

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* information for other volunteers interested in doing similar work:

<http://foreignvolunteersjapan.blogspot.com/2011/05/volunteering-in-iwanuma.html>

<http://foreignvolunteersjapan.blogspot.com/2011/05/tohoku-needs-volunteer-help-now.html>