

Sangatsu Juuichi nichi

Itsu made mo ano hi ga watakushi no kokoro ni yake tsuite orimasu.

Itsu made mo ano hi ga wasurerarenai hi ni narimasu.

March 11, 2011.

Like so many pivotal global events, you can remember exactly where you were at that moment.

I was driving to the coast. I had lost telephone reception. When I was back in range, my phone had so many messages I knew something major had happened.

Then I saw the tsunami on TV that night.

A massive black ink blot swelling over the north eastern coast of Japan.

For me, the story is a very personal one. I lived in Ishinomaki for a year after I graduated from university in Sydney. I taught English in schools all over the district - including many that were devastated by the tsunami last year. My year in Ishinomaki laid such important foundations for my life - including leading me to pursue a career in international relations. But it was the connection to people that was the most wonderful part of my year there. The teachers, parents, students, and locals all made me part of their life for that year. I danced in the summer Kawabiraki festival, went skiing with the teachers, joined in the festivals throughout the year, and felt the incredible big-hearted generosity of the people of Ishinomaki.

When I saw the TV news on 11 March, I knew the damage to Ishinomaki would have been severe. And it was. It took months to find out if dear friends had survived and were ok. I felt helpless and a long way away.

So when the Japanese government offered me the opportunity to return to Sendai and Ishinomaki, I was very eager to go back.

So in October, I returned for a week.

I taught English classes again with my old friend who, like me, was a young graduate straight out of university when I lived in Ishinomaki.

I met up with the couple who I stayed with when I had first arrived in Ishinomaki in 1987, and who had spent 84 days in an evacuation centre.

I met the teachers at my old school and heard in harrowing detail of those who narrowly escaped death, and their dedication in looking after students and local citizens camped at the school for many months because of the high water and because their homes were gone.

The view from Hiyoori yama park at the top of Ishinomaki is still etched in my mind - the vast swathes of land now standing vacant, having been destroyed by the tsunami.

And yet, my lesson at the end of that week was to be impressed all over again at the courage, strength and resilience of the Japanese people.

The scenes on our TV screens on Sunday of the anniversary commemorations in Japan reminded us all all over again how devastating the events of 11 March 2011 were and how much work still needs to be done.

But I know the courage and resilience of the Japanese people. And I know they will continue to rebuild their lives and communities.

Your Australian friends wish you every success and want to assure you of our friendship and practical support for the years ahead.