

Taylor's Reading Corner and the Great East Japan earthquake

Young American woman's dream lives on

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By Naomi Chiba

1. Introduction

The Great East Japan earthquake occurred on March 11, 2011 along the coastal areas of the Pacific Ocean in northern Japan. The natural disaster caused enormous and severe structural damages and more than 15,000 people lost their lives.

A fishing port city called Ishinomaki, in Miyagi prefecture, was one of the cities hit by the earthquake and giant tsunami that followed. The city lost more than 3,000 people. Taylor Anderson, a young American woman, was one of them.

Taylor's Reading Corner, a reading corner named after her, is a reading space for children and young students in schools in Ishinomaki. The small reading corner provides student not only the joy of reading that can open up a new world, but also gives them hope to live on, telling them how important it is to have a dream.

2. About Taylor Anderson

Taylor Anderson was twenty-four when she lost her life on foreign soil, in Japan. She was teaching English as an assistant language teacher with the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program after graduating from Randolph-Macon College, in Virginia (US), in 2008.

She became interested in Japan from early in her childhood, and started learning about Japanese culture, literature, and language. Her interest in Japan was nurtured by reading related books since she was young. She had a dream to become a bridge between the US and Japan. She followed that dream: she enrolled Randolph-Macon College with a Bachelor's degree in International Studies and minors in Asian Studies and Political Science. Her lifelong love and passion for Japan led her to Ishinomaki, a city in the Tohoku region of northern Japan.

She was assigned to teach English at several schools including a kindergarten, and multiple elementary and junior high schools. She enjoyed teaching and being around children and young students. She was teaching at an elementary school when the earthquake hit the region on that day in 2011. Many schools were preparing for graduation ceremonies. It was a snowy day. Children evacuated to the school playgrounds, shivering and shaking with coldness, fear, and anxiety. Taylor was among the teachers comforting children and making sure that all of them were picked up by

their families. She was biking back to her apartment when the tsunami took her away.

She spent two and a half years in Ishinomaki before the tragedy occurred. She was planning to leave Japan to go home and to get married.

3. About Taylor's Reading Corner

Taylor's parents, Andy and Jeanne Anderson, and sister, Julia, founded the Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund ten days after the disaster, the same day they learned Taylor had not survived. They were determined to help the children affected by the earthquake and tsunami in the place where Taylor had made so many friends and considered her second home. Countless children lost their houses, families, friends, and loved ones in the disaster. They were separated from a familiar environment and suffered both physically and mentally.

Mr. and Mrs. Anderson reached out to these children in the aftermath of the tragedy. They said, "this is what Taylor would have been doing if she were alive." The Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund supports several projects, such as inviting children to the US to learn English and experience a life overseas, providing necessary educational materials, providing scholarships, and funding non-profit organizations to assist young people.

One of the big projects by the Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund is installing reading corners in the schools where Taylor used to teach. The fund presented books Taylor liked to read when she was small, as well as books chosen by each school. These books were given along with bookshelves made by a wood craftsman, Shinichi Endo, who also lost his three children in the disaster. Two were Taylor's students in elementary school.

The first reading corner was installed on September 6, 2011 at Mangokuura Elementary School, where Taylor was last seen. On December 5, 2013, the seventh one was installed at a kindergarten, which meant that all the seven schools where Taylor had taught received the reading corners. In addition, the Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund presented Taylor's Reading Corners at an additional school and university in Ishinomaki

4. About Endo Shinichi, the wood craftsman

Mr. Shinichi Endo, wood craftsman, made all of the Taylor Reading Corner bookshelves. He lived in Ishinomaki when the earthquake and tsunami hit. He lost his three children at once: Hana, his thirteen-year-old daughter, Kanta, his ten-year-old son, and Kana, his eight-year-old daughter. He regrets that he could not protect them as a father, and did not know how to continue to live without them; life seemed meaningless without his children.

One day after the disaster, a request arrived for Mr. Edo to make a bookshelf for a reading corner for children in Ishinomaki, the Taylor Reading Corner by Mr. and Mrs. Anderson. It encouraged Mr. Edo to look forward, and to face reality. Two of his children had been Taylor's students. They used to tell Mr. Edo and his wife how much fun they had in English class in school when they came home after school. "I would like to live the rest of my life without shame for my children. I feel so close to them, like their souls are watching over me. I want to be a father they can be proud of."

Mr. Edo's children were always big fans of his woodwork. He thought his children would be pleased if he made Taylor's Reading Corner bookshelves. He appreciates many people's caring support and kind assistance throughout Japan and the world. "My children taught me what life was all about. I want to pass messages of the 3.11 earthquake and tsunami to future generations." He made the bookshelves in memory of Taylor and his three children.¹

5. The Great East Japan earthquake and reading

The Great East Japan earthquake in 2011 took away precious lives of family members, relatives, friends, and acquaintances in an instant. Many are still waiting for their missing loved ones five years after it occurred.

People affected by the disaster lost their daily way of life, homes, and jobs. Food, clothing, electricity, gas, water, daily necessities were all unavailable. Whole towns were covered by debris.

People did all they could just to survive for the first several months. People needed mental care. They lived inconvenient life styles. They lived in evacuation shelters, temporary housing, apartments provided by the city, or relatives' houses. Most of all, children were deprived of their familiar homes and neighbors. They had to adjust new living conditions and surroundings, which included commuting long distances on school buses, studying in unfamiliar buildings or being forced to change schools. They were surrounded with debris, broken roads, and destroyed buildings. Entire communities were torn down, and tomorrow promised nothing.

School libraries played an important role for children. Reading books provided quality time and a comfortable, peaceful space. It led the children to a world of healing, ease, a relief from anxiety, worry, and fear. It also nurtured their imagination, creativity, and sensitivity, essential for young people. It encouraged more thinking skills.²

Taylor's Reading Corners played a significant role in schools, helping children deal with going through a very difficult time.

6. What does Taylor's Reading Corner mean?

Taylor's Reading Corner has various meanings for children and communities. It depends on whom, when, and where they see Taylor's Reading Corner.

a) Memorial

Taylor's Reading Corner is a memorial for the young American woman who lived just twenty-four years. Taylor's Reading Corner remembers the time when Taylor was with us.

Taylor's parents have visited Ishinomaki more than ten times since 2011, getting to see how much the Ishinomaki community loved her. Her parents experienced it by visiting the town and meeting with people who had known Taylor. Taylor's mother, Jeanne, says that she never regrets letting Taylor to go to Japan, because it was Taylor's dream.

Visitors to Taylor's Reading Corner can remember her, and can remember what happened on March 11, 2011.

b) Healing and joy

Taylor's Reading Corner offers reading space and time for children and young students in difficult situations in the aftermath of the natural disaster. It gives a space to read quietly and enjoy letting the imagination wander, and it also gives time for fun and joy alone or with friends.

It opens up doors for reading and other worlds in the mind and the heart. Reading helps people escape from chaos and discover new and interesting things. There was no electricity for several weeks after the disaster. This meant that children had no access to TV or the Internet, but reading printed books was a way of passing the time.

c) English language education

There are a number of books in English in Taylor's Reading Corners. These books are about other countries such as the US, stories of animals, flowers, space, cooking, etc. Most are written in simple English. In this way, Japanese children can be exposed to English from a young age.

A former student of Taylor at Mangokuura Elementary School says "I will never forget how interesting and fun it was to learn English in Taylor's classes, and I want to learn more. I have a dream to become an English teacher one day. I will do my best to make that dream come true. I decided to become a wonderful teacher like Taylor."³ One university student, who learned English from Taylor in a junior high also says, "Taylor was always cheerful and easy to talk to. She taught us how enjoyable and joyful it is to learn English. I came to be interested in the world by encountering English through her."⁴ Taylor's Reading Corner helps young people explore and become interested in

English.

d) International exchange and international education

One elementary school teacher says “visitors come to see Taylor’s Reading Corner not only from Japan or the US, but from all over the world.”⁵ Children have opportunities to meet with visitors from overseas, which leads to interest in the world outside of Japan, step by step.

More children began to look globally once they had Taylor’s Reading Corner in their schools. Most of all, they have felt the mental and psychological support not only from within Japan but from the international community. Every time Taylor’s parents, American high school students, university students, various international associations and organizations, or other guests visit, the children try to greet them in simple English and welcome them by singing and dancing. They play games together. This kind of opportunity to interact with people from outside of Japan widens their mindset. It also strengthens communication; the children build skills to interact with people who have different languages, cultures, and values.

Taylor’s parents read books from Taylor Reading Corners to children whenever they visit Ishinomaki. Children can enjoy stories in the original language, and hear English from a native speaker. Taylor’s parents say, “we read books to them like we used to read for Taylor when she was little.”⁷

Caroline Kennedy, the US Ambassador to Japan, also visited an elementary school in Ishinomaki and read the children the American children’s book, *Where the Wild Things Are*.⁸

e) Disaster prevention education

Taylor’s Reading Corner can be used as a tool to pass on the memory of the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami to future generations. So many lost their lives or are still missing after March 11, 2011. We cannot rely on only people’s memories, documents, or records to remember this tragedy. Visual monuments or memorials are also important to reinforce memory such historic events.

The same tragedy should not be repeated. Taylor’s Reading Corners in educational settings serve a vital role for disaster prevention education for children, parents, teachers, administrators, and communities in Ishinomaki and other areas. It offers a place and time where visitors can remember and learn about the Great East Japan earthquake. They can find messages and meanings. The lessons to be learned are significant.

f) Creating a circle of friendship

Taylor's Reading Corners link various people in Japan, the US, and other countries, including Taylor's family, Mr. Endo, the Ishinomaki community, the Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund, local bookstores, educators, library staff, and most of all children and the international community.

Books in English in Taylor's Reading Corners are translated into Japanese by local and international volunteers, former and current JET teachers, etc., who glue the Japanese translation onto each page by hand. Parents and volunteers periodically read books to elementary school students. Some volunteer groups are actively promoting reading habits from childhood through Taylor's Reading Corners. Foreign visitors continue coming to the Reading Corners, and books have been donated by individuals and groups. Although nobody has met him yet, one American librarian periodically sends boxes of books from the US to all of Taylor's Reading Corners in Ishinomaki—

g) Tool for information

People continue to visit areas affected by the earthquake and tsunami after 2011. Hearing the survivors' experiences and seeing the places in person are important. However, as years pass, people pay less attention, and survivors themselves have difficulty remembering their experiences in detail. Destroyed houses, buildings, and bridges were cleared, and whole areas are now under construction. Areas change everyday in the process of rebuilding and restoring. It is getting hard to keep track of the disaster and to remember exactly what happened.

Taylor's Reading Corner can be a symbol to send messages about the natural disaster and how people were forced to live after it occurred. It can be a starting point to collect information and communicate it to the world.

7. Conclusion

One young American woman lost her life in a foreign country, in Japan. She was living her dream to become a bridge between the US and Japan, which was inspired by the reading in her childhood. Taylor Anderson loved the Japanese children very much. She told them how important it was to live their dreams, too. Her passion lives on through Taylor's Reading Corner.

Many of Taylor's former colleagues, such as teachers and administrators, have been transferred to different schools after 2011. New teachers who did not know Taylor have come to Ishinomaki from other towns. They do not know much about Taylor's Reading Corners. Her former students will graduate from the schools where Taylor taught. Who will continue the story of Taylor's Reading Corner? This will be the task for each school.

Seeds are planted with Taylor's Reading Corner.

The author of this essay was friends with Taylor since 2008, when Taylor first arrived in Ishinomaki. The author hopes to see the flowers blossom from these seeds in the future.

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Andy Anderson
Naomi Chiba