HARVESTING HOPE

By Kaitlyn Chu

"Every day is a day to be thankful…In every circumstance there is something for which to be thankful. Even when there seems to be nothing else, there is hope."

-Ralph Marston

When I found out I was going to Japan this past summer as a player on the Yonsei Basketball Association Goodwill Games team, I knew I also wanted to visit a city that was affected by the horrifying 9.0 earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011. I wanted to see how things look now, and I was worried about how the victims were affected and how they have been doing. For the last three years, I have volunteered at Walk the Farm, and I wondered if I could meet some of the farmers that Tanaka Farms and OCO have been supporting. This August, thanks to the invaluable coordinated efforts of Mr. Tanaka and Mr. Takazawa, my family and I were able to meet two farmers from the Sendai area, one of the hardest hit cities.

Before I was about to embark on this inspiring journey, I was a little concerned because I had heard about the continued radiation leaks from the nearby damaged Fukushima nuclear plant. It also took some dedication on my part to miss the end of my amazing Yonsei trip and to persuade my parents into making the long trip to Sendai happen. I didn't know what to expect. I thought the land would still be filled with debris. I thought the farmers would have big farms. I thought I would have a hard time understanding their stories. As I got off the bullet train, I was both anxious and excited to finally arrive and hear the farmers' personal stories!

We spent half a day in Idohama with Farmer Otomo and Yuki, our translator. I was very grateful that they were so kind and eager to share their stories with us. It was so heartbreaking to hear how Farmer Otomo lost so much in such a short amount of time. He showed us pictures of his old house, which was so big and nice. His house was less than a mile away from the ocean, and the destructive tsunami crashed through his house and violently tossed his cars and farm equipment with the overpowering crush of water. Thirty eight of his neighbors tragically perished, and his neighborhood of 102 farms was left barren, reduced to rubble with little to salvage.

There is one story that he shared with us that I will never forget. After the earthquake, Farmer Otomo stopped to put an elderly neighbor on his back to try to carry him to the evacuation center. They were very close to the front entrance, when seawater from the tsunami surged over his knees and his neighbor insisted, “save yourself,” and demanded to be left there. With a heavy heart, Farmer Otomo raced to the second floor of the evacuation center and could not bear to look out the window to see his neighbor being swept away by the raging tsunami. His body was found 3 days later. Farmer Otomo still regrets not being able to save him. While hearing this story, my eyes watered. I felt awful. I couldn’t even imagine being in his situation.

Farmer Otomo drove us to the evacuation center, and he showed us how close they were to the entrance when the tsunami struck. Understanding his stories was easier for me because we were seeing and walking through what he was telling us. It was really eye-opening for me. The evacuation center used to be the community middle school. It was an eerie deserted place that has been abandoned since the tsunami. The playground was rusting, and it looked so lonely surrounded by overgrown weeds. Inside the school, we could see the chalk bulletin board in the teacher’s lounge which still showed that graduation was on

that March 11th. We could also see the stained water line from the tsunami close to the ceiling of the first floor.

We also drove to his old neighborhood where his house once stood. On the way, I noticed that most of the debris has been cleared. But I also saw tractors and construction crews still moving dirt around and working hard. When we arrived, it was hard to believe that a house once stood there. All I saw was a few brick steps leading up to what was once his home's entrance. Before the tsunami, the local farmers had small fields. It is too hard for them financially to start over, so they have formed a co-op with the government's help. Out of 102 farms in his neighborhood, only 10 families would like to continue farming, and of those 10, only 4 have resumed living in the neighborhood. These four families that Walk the Farm has supported have given their land to the co-op, which is getting the land ready for farming by forming one big field from the family farms. The farmers will then go from land-owners to employees of this co-op.

I was relieved to find out that with help from Walk the Farm, Farmer Otomo has been able to purchase part of a small field much further away from the ocean so that he may continue his passion for farming, even if on a small scale. His dream is to build a home on this land someday. It's heartening to see that Farmer Otomo didn't give up farming, and that he is continuing to do what he loves even if he has to water the plants by hand with a bucket. He grows Japanese pumpkins, edamame, and mini-tomatoes. I was really excited to see a real edamame plant for the first time! We got to try them, and they were so good!

We stopped by the local temporary housing which looked like school portables to me. They were built on top of tennis courts and a parking lot. Out of 102 local farming families, 60 families continue to live there. It looked very uncomfortable, and Farmer Otomo told us that depression, alcoholism and domestic violence is a disturbing reality. I felt really bad for

the people that have had to live there for 2 years already. Temporary housing is supposed to end next year, but many, especially the elderly, have nowhere to go. Thanks to Walk the Farm, Farmer Otomo has been able to move his family out of the cramped temporary housing into an apartment. But, he still visits and volunteers his time there. Farmer Otomo brings crops from his small field, and he also invites them to work on his field to raise the spirits of the farmers who live there.

Farmer Otomo enjoyed looking at our pictures from Walk the Farm and Tanaka Farms that were in our Yonsei program. He was happy to see our Yonsei team at Walk the Farm, and he was amazed to hear there were over 2,000 walkers and 500 volunteers. We could all tell how thankful Farmer Otomo is to Glenn Tanaka, OCO and to Walk the Farm. He is so grateful to all of us for our continued support and for not forgetting about farmers like him in Japan.

Next on our farming adventure was a visit with Farmer Takao with translator Pastor Ami. They were both so friendly and full of contagious smiles. His farm is in Watari in Miyagi, about 20 miles away from Sendai. He has been farming for over 40 years. Out of 400 strawberry farmers in his area, 200 were forced to give up and leave after the earthquake and tsunami. In Farmer Takao's immediate neighborhood, out of about 50 farmers, 22 of them left farming. It was shocking to me that that many people were unable to continue farming. And even though Farmer Takao's home was washed away by the tsunami, he didn't give up. He was able to rebuild, but it is half the size of his original spacious home.

The tsunami caused the soil to be contaminated and too salty for his strawberries to grow on the ground. With the help of the government and Walk the Farm, Farmer Takao has been able to rebuild his strawberry greenhouses and resume farming. He has created a successful and unique method so that contaminated soil is not a problem by growing his

strawberries in beds that are elevated above the ground. His super sweet variety of local Miyagi strawberries are called Mo Ikko which means “one more”. He said with an enormous smile, “When you eat one of my strawberries you will want one more. You can’t have just one.” I was really looking forward to trying these famous strawberries, but the next crop of strawberries won’t be ready until February, so we will have to go back someday!

After meeting both farmers, I realized how important Walk the Farm is to them in their everyday lives. Before my trip to Sendai, Walk the Farm meant volunteering to make posters and cheering on walkers, eating delicious food, and seeing friends. After meeting Farmer Otomo and Farmer Takao, and now thinking of them as my friends, I want to make sure they continue to ganbare – never give up! So when you sign up for Walk the Farm, or sign up to volunteer, or become a sponsor, know that you are helping people who need it for daily living and you are showing your support to harvest hope for the future!

I have realized that even a teenager like me can make a difference. If I didn’t convince my parents that I really wanted to go, I wouldn’t be able to share my incredible experience and urge all of you to keep on supporting the farmers. I believe that it is important for me to give back to OCO for giving me so many happy memories, close friends and opportunities to help others. This year, I have been busy since being elected the Vice President of Activities for OCO’s Octagons. I got my family to gather up a carload of clothes for the Kids Helping Kids yard sale. The proceeds went to Kodomo Mirai Kinkin, a non-profit organization that helps fund the education for the over a thousand students who lost one or both parent(s) during the tsunami. I can’t even imagine losing either of my parents.

I am so thankful for Farmer Otomo, Yuki, Farmer Takao and Pastor Ami for giving me such an inspirational and moving experience that I will never forget. I truly appreciate everything they did for us, for spending all that time with us, and for welcoming and

responding to all of our questions (even though my Google Translate Japanese was probably hard to understand.) I know that they won't give up, and that they will continue to move forward. I am thankful for my parents who supported my idea to visit Sendai. I know that I wouldn't have made it there without their encouragement and love. I am thankful for our OCO Octagon Advisors, Shirley Kaichi and Mark Nakao. I know that they work so hard to make Octagons the best it can be, and they help us become enthusiastic about community service. I am especially thankful for Glenn Tanaka and Takeshi Takazawa for coordinating everything and for giving us this incredible once-in-a-lifetime experience. I know that I will continue to share their stories, and I am even more motivated to stay involved in giving back to the community, both here and in Japan.

I'm really glad Walk the Farm supports Farmer Otomo, Farmer Takao and other farmers in need. Their amazing attitude, calm courage, and firm faith will inspire me to be thankful even during the darkest times. I am committed to harvesting hope, and I hope you are, too!

For additional information about the farmers Walk the Farm has helped, please go to:

http://www.walkthefarm.com/Mar13_rev3.pdf

http://www.walkthefarm.com/farmers-of-japan.html

http://www.walkthefarm.com/Recipients.html

For additional information about the Fund for the Future of Children affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake:

http://www.mirai-kikin.com/en/index.html