

Ceremonial first pitches shine spotlight on people affected by 3/11

After last year's Tohoku disasters, four individuals find different ways to help in the region's recovery

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The four people who threw out the first pitch prior to the first game of the MLB season each came from a different walk of life, before a terrible tragedy brought them together.

They were a couple living in Richmond, Virginia, the proud parents of a "walking ray of sunshine;" he grew strawberries in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture; and she was leading a normal life in Tokyo.

Everything changed March 11, 2011, when the Tohoku region was ravaged by the effects of a devastating earthquake and tsunami. The four were affected in different, life-altering ways in the aftermath of that day.

On Wednesday, MLB honored them in a ceremony, hoping to also bring attention to the work still to be done in the Tohoku region.

"We were very careful about how we should treat the events of March 11, and use the opportunity that opening the season here in Japan provided us to do the right thing," said Jim Small, managing director of MLB Japan.

For the Andersons, Andy and Jean, nothing will ever be the same. Their daughter, Taylor, was teaching English in Ishinomaki when the earthquake struck. After helping to get her students to safety she headed for home, but was lost in the tsunami.

She was 24 years old and the first American death recorded in the tragedy.

"We really felt honored for Taylor tonight," Andy Anderson said. "That Major League Baseball would recognize Taylor and the work that she's inspired us to do."

Propelled by a need to do what they felt their daughter, who acquired a love for Japan at a young age, would've wanted, the Andersons helped establish the Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund, which will help aid reading efforts for children in the region and provide Christmas presents to orphans among other things.

"Through this past year, what helped us get through our grieving process is helping others and volunteering," said Jean Anderson. "It just makes you get up everyday and move on with your life. We experienced a terrible loss and we feel connected with the people in Tohoku because they've lost a lot also. ... We just hope people out there don't forget them.



Starting anew: Andy Anderson (front), whose daughter Taylor died in the March 11 tsunami last year in Miyagi Prefecture, throws out a ceremonial first pitch at Tokyo Dome on Thursday before the Seattle Mariners-Oakland Athletics game. Anderson and his wife, Jean, are involved in helping Tohoku rebuild with the establishment of the Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund. KYODO

"By having Taylor's fund supporting so many people there, it makes us happy."

Shinji Takai lost his strawberry farm in the tsunami, but while cleaning up, he noticed someone had lost something dear to them as well. What Takai found was a picture, and it inspired him to begin Memory Recovery Project, which is dedicated to restoring photos that were lost and damaged during the earthquake and tsunami.

"I'm working on restoring pictures, and I would like to continue this project in the future," Takai said. "Because the number of pictures that we collected is enormous and that's how many memories people had lost.

"We collected them just to honor their memories. We restored the pictures and some of the enormous amount were returned to the people who owned them. So we really need to keep this project going. I believe this is not just people's memories, but memories of the disaster itself, so this is something we cannot forget."

Stay-at-home mom Naho Hozumi watched the events of March 11 unfold on television at her home. She saw the devastation caused by the twin natural disaster and felt she had to contribute in some way.

Eventually she volunteered with Hands on Tokyo, collecting and distributing supplies. She has since gone on to become the organization's Tokyo Disaster Relief Program Manager.

"I started from nothing," Hozumi said. "Since then, it's been over a year, there are more than 1,000 volunteers and many more sponsors who are trying to meet needs of the disaster area.

Hozumi is hopeful the attention the MLB opener brings will help keep the volunteer effort in the spotlight.

"After a year of volunteering, the amounts of volunteers isn't as high as it was a year ago," Hozumi said. "But with the big event, we feel the importance of volunteerism has been restored."

What connected this group, was the will to do good in the face of an unspeakable tragedy. No amount of work will make their lives what they were, but they are still selflessly working to better the conditions of other affected by the events of March 11, 2011.

"We've, Jean and I, had a loss as many of the people in Tohoku have," said Andy Anderson. "What we think about a lot about is, remembering Taylor and how we think she would have acted and honoring her by acting in that way.

"So what I hope the people in Tohoku can do is think the same (way). Maybe they lost a relative, and they have a favorite thought about that relative that they act on. Maybe it was their grandmother, who told them to study hard. Something like that."

For more information on the Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund, visit www.st.catherines.org/tayloranderson

More details about Hands on Tokyo can be found at www.handsontokyo.org

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