

From Rwanda with Love

COURTESY OF THINK ABOUT EDUCATION RWANDA

The children of Umuco Mwiza Academy in Kigali, Rwanda, write messages of support for victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake. There is a collection box on the table.

Having survived the tragic Rwandan genocide in 1994, estimated to have claimed the lives of up to one million people, **Kambenga Marie Louise** and her family moved from Rwanda to the city of Fukushima in Fukushima Prefecture. She chose to stay in her “second hometown” even after the Great East Japan Earthquake and has been involved in a whole host of activities since then. Masaki Yamada reports.

Rwandan Kambenga Marie Louise has had links with the city of Fukushima, which she now calls home, ever since 1993. Working as a teacher at a dressmaking college in Rwanda at the time, she was given a place on a trainee scheme in Japan, courtesy of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). This led to her spending a year studying dressmaking techniques at a technical school in Fukushima. In April 1994 however, not long after Marie Louise had returned to Rwanda, fierce fighting broke out between ethnic groups in the capital Kigali. Fearing for their lives in the face of all-out war, Marie Louise and

her family fled across the border into the neighboring country of Zaire, as it was known then.

“It’s nothing short of a miracle that we all made it through the civil war,” says Marie Louise looking back.

Fortunately, her friends in Fukushima were determined to help her get back to Japan. Thanks to their hard work, Marie Louise was able to return to Japan as a foreign student in December 1994, bringing her family with her. In 2000, Marie Louise and her friends went on to set up Think About Education in Rwanda, an NPO aimed at giving children in Rwanda better access to education. Marie Louise toured round

schools and community centers all over the country and gave countless talks on the importance of life and peace, based on her own experiences. Thanks to support from a great many Japanese people, in 2002 the NPO successfully opened the Umuco Mwiza Academy, a combined kindergarten and elementary school in the Rwandan capital Kigali.

"It's thanks to my good friends in Fukushima that I've managed to make it this far", says Marie Louise. "Fukushima is like a second hometown to me."

That second hometown was one of the places hit by the Great East Japan Earthquake. Although Marie Louise and her family weren't directly affected, many of their Japanese friends were. Marie Louise called on the people of Rwanda to lend their support and received an overwhelming response. The children from Umuco Mwiza Academy sent messages of support and donations. A singer friend of Marie



Kambenga Marie Louise and members of Think About Education in Rwanda visit an evacuation center in Date, Fukushima Prefecture to serve Rwandan coffees and cookies, May 2011.

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Louise's even wrote a song to help encourage everyone in Japan.

Marie Louise herself has been out visiting those living in temporary housing, bringing them Rwandan tea and coffee, or homemade cakes, in an effort to help keep their spirits up. She always takes a copy of the song written by her Rwandan friend and plays it to the people she visits.

Marie Louise has also been actively assisting the foreign media too, keeping the rest of the world updated on conditions in Fukushima after the earthquake. During a trip back to Rwanda in September last year for instance, she found herself being interviewed by local newspapers, TV and radio stations.

"Following the accident at the nuclear power plant, I gathered information about radioactivity levels from Fukushima Prefecture and Fukushima International Association. I speak English, French and Swahili, as well as Rwandan and Japanese, so that has enabled me to provide people around the world with accurate, up-to-date information about conditions in Fukushima, instead of all the harmful rumors that have been flying around," explains Marie Louise. "I believe that's my duty as a resident of Fukushima." 



MASATOSHI SAKAMOTO

Kambenga Marie Louise shares Rwandan foods with members of Think About Education in Rwanda, January 2012.

Masaki Yamada is a freelance writer.