

Building Connections



Steve Yamaguchi (center) chats with fellow volunteers

Steve Yamaguchi, who runs a travel agency in the town of Mogami in Yamagata Prefecture, continues to lend his support to reconstruction activities in neighboring Miyagi Prefecture following the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011. Masaki Yamada reports.

It's mid January 2012 and construction is underway on a small empty lot in the Miyagi Prefecture town of Minamisanriku, looking out over the calm sea. Sawdust is whipped up by the cold northerly wind as builders put together timbers of varying sizes. The sound of electric saws cutting through wood and nails being hammered in fills the air.

"This board needs to go up on the roof. Be careful lifting it up there."

"Let's get the sash in for this window next. Everyone ready?"

The man giving out a steady stream of orders to the thirteen volunteers working onsite is Steve Yamaguchi, originally from Oklahoma of the United States.

Yamaguchi came to Japan in 1986 to study politics at a graduate school in Tokyo. He stayed in Japan after graduating and got a job working for a trading

company. It was then that he met his future wife, the only daughter of the president of a construction company in Mogami, Yamagata Prefecture. Yamaguchi went on to take over the family business from his father-in-law. He set up a travel agency in Mogami in 2007 and has been successfully organizing tours showcasing the cultural and natural highlights of the Tohoku region ever since. Just as business was booming, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck. Although Yamagata Prefecture escaped unharmed, Yamaguchi immediately headed over to Miyagi Prefecture and got to work, helping to clear debris and get fishermen back to work quickly.

Almost one year on from the earthquake, Yamaguchi is now putting his experience running a construction company to good use erecting temporary buildings in the affected area as part of an initiative

called the Prefab Village Project. This project, which aims to improve the quality of life in prefab housing compounds by turning them into “prefab villages,” employs the UBC, or Universal Building Cube, which was designed by Yamaguchi specifically for this project. UBC are sturdy wooden boxes that measure 2.3 meters high by 2 meters wide by 4 meters deep. As UBC can be joined together from left to right or from front to back, it is easy to secure the necessary space for almost any purpose, as long as there is enough land to build on. Most buildings can be completed in two or three days. Although on-site construction work is carried out by locals, volunteers and Project staff, construction is being funded by companies and NPOs assisting with the reconstruction process.

“We are currently using the UBC to create communication spaces for those living in temporary accommodation, from stores to meeting rooms, bars and cafés. What we are aiming to achieve with the UBC Project is to create a ‘temporary village,’ so that those affected by the earthquake can interact freely with one another rather than feeling isolated.”

Thanks to word of mouth and coverage in the newspapers and on TV, Yamaguchi has already received requests for over fifty UBC, with the likes of local authorities and community organizations eager

to use them for purposes such as community centers, fishermen’s rest houses, and temporary restaurants.

Yamaguchi is also running volunteer tours to the affected area via his own travel agency. Since June 2011, more

than 800 people from Tokyo, Osaka and other parts of the country have participated in such tours. Most participants are company employees who “can’t do anything long term, but want to help out for a weekend.” Many of Yamaguchi’s tours were focused on helping to rebuild seaweed cultivation equipment on Miyato Island, Higashi Matsushima City, near the scenic tourist spot of Matsushima in Miyagi Prefecture. Participants helped out with tasks such as removing rubble and making new nets and rafts needed to cultivate seaweed.

“Everyone seemed to be really pleased, not only



Yamaguchi (right) carries a board for use in a formation of Universal Building Cubes that will be used as a meeting room.



Yamaguchi cuts a board.

the people of Miyato Island, but also the volunteers who took part in helping them. I believe that reaching out to people in the affected area and helping them make lasting bonds with volunteers really helps both sides feel happier with themselves,” says Yamaguchi. “We’re hoping to step up both the Prefab Village Project and our volunteer tours this year. So much remains to be done, and so many people from around the world want to help. It’s my job to see that their precious volunteer time is used effectively, enriching the lives of both the volunteers and the people receiving help.”



Masaki Yamada is a freelance writer.