

Canada's "Biggest Fan" of Fukushima

William McMichael, a native of Vancouver, Canada, works in the Student Services Division of Fukushima University. Since the Great East Japan Earthquake struck, he has been actively presenting information on Fukushima to overseas audiences and tackling the recovery of the disaster-affected region. McMichael spoke with the Japan Journal's Osamu Sawaji.

Please tell us about the current situation in Fukushima.

William McMichael: The evacuation of residents from the area surrounding the accident site at the TEPCO nuclear power plant is ongoing, and tsunami damage remains along coastal areas. That said, in most parts of Fukushima Prefecture, people are going about their lives as usual without any disruptions whatsoever. Fukushima City, where Fukushima University is located, is more than 50 kilometers away from the nuclear power plant, and I am comfortable living here.

Before the earthquake hit, there were many students who had their sights set on working in Tokyo after graduating from Fukushima University, but now there has been a huge jump in the number of students wanting to remain in Fukushima to help the recovery. The new academic year begins this April, and we've even seen an increase in the number of entrance exam applicants for Fukushima University compared with last year.

What kinds of activities have you been involved with since the Great

East Japan Earthquake?

Since the earthquake I have visited Romania, Canada, the United States, Germany and France in my capacity as a Fukushima University staff member. At every opportunity I have reported on the current situation in Fukushima and appealed for support. In every country, I've gotten the impression that people are very concerned about Japan, and I've realized that Japan is truly loved. My work also involves cooperation between Fukushima University and overseas universities, and since the Great East Japan Earthquake, we have decided on affiliations such as exchange student programs with universities in Romania, Belarus, China and the United States as a part of each university's support for the disaster-affected area.

I also co-established Hearts for Haragama, a volunteer organization that provides support to a kindergarten in Soma, Fukushima Prefecture, which suffered enormous damage from the tsunami. I have taken part in activities with other foreigners residing in Fukushima, such as delivering supplies, collecting donations and conducting exchanges with kindergarten students.

What is it you find appealing about Fukushima?

I think it's the people. The people in Fukushima have very strong feelings of compassion for one another. When I went to the supermarket with my wife and our three-year-old son the day after the quake, I entered through the back door by mistake. As I noticed there was a long line to get into the store, I tried to leave, but a store clerk was concerned about us with our child and allowed us to shop without going back out to queue up. What's more, when we tried to pay, we were told, "You look like you have enough on your plate now, so please pay when things calm down."

The nature is also wonderful. I love to ski, and the quality of the snow in Fukushima is as good as anything in Canada. Another thing is the cherry blossoms. The Takizakura, a cherry tree said to be some 1,300 years old in the town of Miharu, is truly beautiful. Fukushima is also full of historical buildings and ruins, such as the series of Buddhist statues carved into the rock face of Shinobu-yama mountain during the Edo period (1603–1867).

Tell us about your future goals.

From the age of five to eight, I lived in Japan, which is my mother's home country. During that time I read the biography of Inazo Nitobe, and ever since I have wanted to do a job that involved building bridges between Canada and Japan. I've only lived in Fukushima for about



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five years, but I take pride in the feeling that I'm one of Canada's biggest fans of Fukushima. Now I consider it my role to establish links between Fukushima and Canada, and between Fukushima and the rest of the world. This June, around ten students from an American university affiliated with Fukushima University will stay in Fukushima for about two weeks to take part in activities such as reconstruction support and work with farming households. In the future, I want to attract even more students to Fukushima.

From April 2011, Fukushima University's Fukushima Future Center for Regional Revitalization began operation, and I hope that many researchers from overseas come to the center. The center conducts research into a broad range of fields aimed at Fukushima's recovery, including education, disaster prevention, city planning and the environment. This is probably the only place in the world where you can conduct research into recovery from a disaster and have that research actually aid in the recovery going on around you. I hope we can turn adversity into opportunity and connect these efforts to Fukushima's recovery.

