



Delawareans look to reach out to their 'sister state'

Written by

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The News Journal

2:36 AM, Mar. 16, 2011|

DOVER -- Delaware residents with a special connection started brainstorming relief efforts Tuesday night for victims of the Japanese earthquake.

Many of the people who gathered at Dover High School had hosted exchange students from the hardest-hit regions.

Since 1997, Delaware has been a sister state to Miyagi prefecture, the Japanese province most affected by the disaster. Each year, dozens of local students take part in exchanges with Miyagi students.

A group of 10 Japanese students was scheduled to travel to Dover High School the day after the earthquake hit. The trip was canceled but all the students are safe, said Miki Smith, a Tokyo native who now lives in Dover and works with the state government and school districts to coordinate student exchanges.

Dover High School Principal Gene Montano said he is hopeful that the exchange can still happen, albeit many months from now.

"We've had that for seven years, and

groups of students come here since then," Montano said. "We were going to take a group this summer, but I don't think that is going to happen with this situation."

The most recent student exchange occurred last summer. Smith said the students on that trip were worried about what happened to their host families.

Cameron Connor, a junior at Caesar Rodney High School, lived with a family in Sendai, which is the city closest to the epicenter of the earthquake. Connor was relieved to see an e-mail from her host sister on Sunday saying that the family was doing well.

"It gets personal when you see that your friends could be affected. Just not knowing if they are OK or not, that was the worst, just waiting to see if they were OK," she said.

Susan Betts chaperoned an exchange program in Miyagi last summer. She learned on Monday that her host family's

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house had been washed away by the tsunami, but everyone was safe.

"I turned on the television and all I could do was cry," Betts said.

Smith said she organized the meeting for past exchange program participants and community members to brainstorm ways to help.

"If you haven't heard about someone you love, you care about, don't worry," Smith told the group, adding that communication to the region has been difficult due to power outages. "Please be patient, you will hear from people."

Smith said a lot of people do not know about the relationship Delaware has with Miyagi.

"Lots of people don't know unless you are involved, but now we are trying to reach out to the community and let them know this is our 14th year," she said.

Smith encouraged the crowd to write letters to their friends and host families in Japan. Since parts of Miyagi are still without power and the postal service is not working, Smith arranged for a diplomat to take back the letters and deliver them to the schools.

"It says there is someone there in America thinking of you," she said. "It's a very encouraging thing."

Smith said she would like relief efforts to focus on the communities that Delaware

has partnerships with. Suggestions at the meeting included holding corporate fundraisers and reaching out to individual communities to hold fundraising drives.

"We want to make sure it's organized, so people don't take advantage of resources," Smith said.

Right now they are just in beginning stages, she said. They still need to find out what relief is most needed, whether it is physical supplies or just cash.

Mariko Sai, a Miyagi native who now lives in Middle Creek, said her family's home remained intact after the earthquake, but it is now in danger from the nuclear reactors and a scarcity of food and fuel. She said her sister has not been able to leave her house for days due to the threat of radiation.

"It's getting horrible, especially water and gas," Sai said. "Most of the places have sold out."

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She hopes the Delaware community will support her home.

A representative of the Delaware Department of State said the state government is working on creating a website where Delawareans learn how to help Miyagi.

Smith remains hopeful that Japan will recover from this crisis.

"We can look at it and say, 'Oh my gosh, we overcame this,' " she said.



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Dover resident Miki Smith, who is from Tokyo, gets a hug from a friend Tuesday night in Dover. / The News Journal BOB HERBERT



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Magnolia residents Charlotte Priest (from left), 14, sister Raleigh, 5, and mom, Hiromi -- a native of Japan -- attend the meeting Tuesday. / The News Journal/BOB HERBERT

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