

Surfing the silent waves



Documentary on Shizuoka surfer teaches deaf filmmaker a new way to communicate

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As a young documentary filmmaker, Ayako Imamura had been wrestling with feelings of emptiness. Deaf since birth, the 32-year-old Nagoya native has shot about 30 short films documenting the lives of deaf people in Japan since 2000. But at one point in her career, she realized that her creative energy had come from her anger at — and the frustration with — the lack of social support for the deaf. And while she aspired to be a bridge between the deaf and hearing communities, she felt that she herself had put up a barrier between her and those who didn't use sign language.

Then she met Tatsuro Ota. Ota is a 49-year-old surf and Hawaiian goods shop owner in Kosai, Shizuoka Prefecture, a scenic city flanked by the Pacific Ocean to the south and Lake Hamanako to the east. Visiting him three years ago, Imamura was surprised by the lack of even the slightest bit of reservation the deaf shop owner had in his communication with customers and friends, many of who were not deaf and didn't know sign language. She was even shocked to find that people regarded him simply as a Hawaiian-looking surf shop operator, and not as a hearing impaired man.

Imamura followed him around for two years, looking for answers to her question: "How can you have so much fun

communicating with people who can hear?"

Her heart-warming and moving account of the man sporting an Aloha shirt and a broad smile is the subject of her first feature-length film, "Kohi to Enpitsu" ("Coffee and A Pencil"), scheduled to be shown in Tokyo next month. The movie, which features Japanese subtitles handwritten by Imamura and also narrated by her, is now being translated into English to be submitted to film festivals overseas, according to producer Mami Akutsu.

The title of the 67-minute documentary film comes from the tools that Ota uses to break the ice with customers. Ota — who, on top of being a surf shop owner, is a surfboard builder/repairer and a competitive surfer — came up with the idea of offering a cup of coffee to everyone visiting his shop, after seeing first-time shoppers leave the store the moment they found out that its owner is deaf. So the standard procedure for him when a customer walks in is to pour fresh Kona coffee into a paper cup and place it on the counter, then point to a sign that says: "I have hearing difficulties. Please use memos."

In one scene from in the movie, Imamura captures an amazing relationship that develops between him and a family who visits the store for the first time. Initially, the visitors appear uncomfortable, apparently because they didn't know until entering the shop that its owner couldn't hear. As they nervously divert their eyes away from him and look vacantly at the various cute



Hawaiian goods lining the shelves, Ota looks on. And then he takes out a paper board and starts scribbling something down with a pencil.

Next, by pointing to a bunch of trophies displayed on a shelf behind the counter, he tells them with a smile that he won all the trophies himself in surfing competitions over the years. The mother and teenage-looking boy get curious, and follow up on the conversation by writing stuff down.

Soon the paper board is filled with scribbles, and the boy starts asking about the Kona coffee beans sold in the store. Ota points out that there are different flavors, pushing the coffee bags toward his face and nudging him by gestures to sniff out the difference.

As we watch the movie, we learn that Ota has a community of professional and amateur surfers who come to the store to



Soundwaves: (Clockwise from top right) A scene from Ayako Imamura's documentary "Coffee and A Pencil," in which the filmmaker chats with surf shop owner Tatsuro Ota over a cup of coffee; a sign at Ota's shop asking shoppers to use memos; Imamura during a recent visit to Tokyo; Ota at the sea. © STUDIO AYA; TOMOKO OTAKE PHOTO

order new surfboards, have repairs done or just hang out. We also learn that Ota, who realized his dream of opening a surf shop four years ago, after working for 20 years at a local company, once harbored an ambition to become a professional surfer.

Ota eventually decided to become a board builder, and looked for years for someone to teach him the skills until he met someone, Masanori Komuro, a pioneer of the Japanese surf scene. But before he met Komuro, his requests for help had been turned down by countless other craftsmen, who all said they couldn't teach the deaf.

The camera then captures the gentle, yet reserved way Ota — who's been married to a deaf woman for 25 years and has a grownup son — consoles a young female professional surfer who bursts into tears after losing a competition that could have determined her future as a pro.

Narrated by Imamura, who has learned to speak, the movie also includes her own exchanges with him. The director even gets a surfing lesson from the same female surfer who lost the competition, communicating by lip-reading, hand gestures and writing in the sand, experiencing firsthand the fear and the excitement Ota must have felt all these years ago, when he rode the waves for the first time.

During a recent interview, Imamura attributed Ota's superb way with people to the fact that he was raised by sociable parents who often hosted home parties and entertained guests with magic shows. He is also a hard worker who never gave up on his dream, she said.

Imamura, who grew up watching Western movies with Japanese subtitles with her family and studied filmmaking at the California State University, Northridge for a year, says shooting the film has also

had a profound impact on her life.

"Before, I was adamant on expressing myself only through the sign language, and felt I couldn't communicate with those who didn't know the language," Imamura said through producer Akutsu, who is also a sign-language interpreter. "As few people can use sign language in Japan, it does limit my opportunities to communicate with people. But there are many other ways to communicate, such as through gestures and writing.

"After meeting Ota-san, I realized that I can communicate with people who can hear, too, and that gave me confidence. And people say I look very different — that I look more relaxed."

One of Imamura's ongoing projects is a documentary film about deaf residents in Tohoku in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake. Imamura says she has made four trips to Miyagi, Fukushima and Iwate prefectures since the disasters struck, noting that she heard stories of how some deaf people were killed by the tsunami because they couldn't hear the warnings. But she also heard stories of others who survived because they had neighbors who came to their houses to let them know.

"I came to realize that community ties are very important. In that sense, Ota-san's story is very important."

"Coffee and A Pencil" will screen for two weeks from March 10 at K's cinema in Shinjuku, Tokyo. Tickets cost ¥1,000 in advance (¥1,300 at the door). The screening will also include a short film on the deaf community in post-March 11 Tohoku. For more information, visit www.coffee-to-enpitsu.com.