

Filmmaker captures the 3/11 stress of Tohoku's deaf

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Nobuko Kikuchi, a 72-year-old resident of Iwanuma, Miyagi Prefecture, couldn't hear the emergency sirens that followed the 9.0-magnitude earthquake that struck on March 11, 2011.

Nor could she hear the public announcement urging people to evacuate to higher ground as a massive tsunami approached the coast of northeastern Japan's Tohoku region.

Kikuchi is deaf. She owes her life to a neighbor who came to alert her. Kikuchi narrowly escaped the monster wave, which uprooted and washed away her house.

In another part of the city, a deaf couple who ran a beauty salon survived — though nobody came knocking on their door. After

the quake, they smelled a "strange odor" and ran up to the second floor of their house. But after the tsunami swept through their house, destroying all the equipment in their salon on the first floor, the couple spent a lonely night alone. They had no information about the scale of the disaster or where they could go to get help.

Such horrific experiences of the Great East Japan Earthquake fill "3.11 Without Sound — There Were Deaf People in the Disaster Area, Too," a 23-minute documentary recently released by deaf filmmaker Ayako Imamura.

Nagoya-based Imamura, 33, has made seven visits to Miyagi, Fukushima and Iwate prefectures since the disaster, meeting and interviewing victims there.

Her film is a bitter reminder of how people with disabilities are neglected during disasters and denied access to the

kind of information that can literally mean the difference between life and death.

Statistics on the number of deaf and hearing-impaired people affected by the disaster are hard to come by. The Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, which has a department serving people with disabilities, will only say that as of May 2011, 14 deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Miyagi Prefecture were killed by the tsunami/quake. A total of 736 others were confirmed to have survived. The ministry has no data for such casualties in Iwate and Fukushima prefectures.

In the film, Imamura cites a report by public broadcaster NHK that puts the number of fatalities among deaf and hard-of-hearing people in the three prefectures at 75.

Imamura, who has shot numerous documentaries on Japan's deaf community, met and interviewed several deaf and hearing-impaired people in Tohoku, including Kikuchi, who the film focuses on.

In an interview filmed in an evacuation shelter one month after the disaster, Kikuchi breaks down as she explains she can't hear any of the announcements on food rationing and other assistance — no one has thought to take her special needs into consideration.

She and her husband, Tokichi (who is also deaf), had no other way of keeping track of new developments than by watching hearing evacuees.

"If they see other people lining up, they would follow suit, assuming some aid item would be handed out," Imamura says in the film. "It's a huge form of stress for her, and she has no time to relax all day."

Kikuchi regains some semblance of normalcy over time. She looks much better in August 2011, when Imamura visits her at an apartment-style temporary housing



Breaking the silence: Ayako Imamura shoots footage for her latest documentary film, "3.11 Without Sound," at Sendai Airport. © STUDIO AYA

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Hearing aid: Nobuko Kikuchi, a deaf resident in the city of Iwanuma, Miyagi Prefecture, shows where her house used to be before it was uprooted and washed away by the monster tsunami on March 11, 2011. © STUDIO AYA

facility, into which the couple moved that May. Nicely coiffed and made-up, Kikuchi smiles as she teaches her granddaughter how to make key chains with colorful plastic beads. The temporary dwelling has the basic necessities — a TV set, air-conditioning and a yellow light to let the couple know when they have visitors. But then a hearing film crew member notices that a fishmonger has just passed — without bothering to tell the Kikuchis.

Imamura visits her again on Dec. 25, 2011. Kikuchi looks pleasantly surprised, showing off many donated sweaters that she was given at a Christmas charity event. But her expression clouds again — conveying to the filmmaker through sign language her feelings of insecurity about her future.

Kikuchi says she doesn't know how much longer the situation will continue. She tells Imamura she is alone now, because Tokichi was hospitalized the previous month.

Now that she's finished the movie, which is subtitled in English, Korean and Portuguese, Imamura says everyone living in Japan should have equal access to vital information, regardless of disability or nationality. Tsunami warnings should be sent to all mobile phone users, she says, using handsets' vibration setting to send emergency alerts to both deaf and blind people. Imamura says all public announcements should be made in simple Japanese and in various languages.

"There are many people in society — hearing people, hard-of-hearing people,

blind people, people in wheelchairs and foreigners," Imamura says in an email. "The message I want to get across in all of my films is that a society where all these people are able to live the life they want to live is a very rich one."

"3.11 Without Sound" (with English subtitles) will be screened at Rikkyo University's Ikebukuro campus on May 3 at 6 p.m., followed by a talk by Imamura. Simultaneous interpretation will be provided between Japanese, English and Japanese sign language. For more information, contact the university at 03-3985-3321 or visit <http://studioaya.com/english/index.html#profile>
