



Takashi Tsuchiya, orphaned by Japan's 2011 tsunami, is about to start university. Photograph: Kazuma Obara/Guardian

Justin McCurry in Rikuzentakata
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Early next month Takashi Tsuchiya will put on his best suit, take a deep breath and embark on what promises to be a successful academic career.

But his parents won't be there to see their son start his engineering degree at one of north-east Japan's best universities.



Five years ago Takashi, then 13, and his elder sister, 15-year-old Naho, left for school from their family home, close to the thousands of towering pine trees that once lined the coast of their hometown, Rikuzentakata. It was the last time they would see their father, Yoshihiko, 50, and their 48-year-old mother, Miki, alive.

The parents were among almost 19,000 victims of a giant tsunami that crashed into hundreds of miles of coastline on the afternoon of 11 March 2011, destroying dozens of towns and villages and causing damage worth an estimated 16.9tn yen (£105bn/US\$150bn). Rikuzentakata lost 1,750 of its 24,000 residents and its entire downtown area after it was hit by a wave measuring up to 15 metres in height.

Yoshihiko's body was found a week later, close to the doomed sports hall that was supposed to have been a safe place for evacuees. Three days later rescue workers found Miki's body near the family's flattened home.

Naho and Takashi were fortunate. They took refuge in their school along with hundreds of other freezing and petrified survivors. It was there that Kiwako Shimizu, a close family friend who had taught Naho and her father traditional Japanese dance, spotted them and gave them a temporary home.

Naho refused to discuss her parents for several years, even with her brother. "For a long time neither of us wanted to talk about the tsunami," says Takashi, who spent a brief period with an uncle and aunt before living in a house with other students while he attended senior high school in the inland town of Ichinoseki. "I still don't have much contact with her."



Takashi with foster mother Kiwako Shimizu, who taught Japanese traditional dance to Takashi's father before the disaster. Photograph: Kazuma Obara/Guardian

Shimizu's living room at her home, which was spared any damage, contains the only mementos of the family's life before tragedy struck. They include a photograph of Naho, now 20, dressed in a bright kimono, at her coming-of-age ceremony earlier this year.

Pride of place goes to the only remaining photograph of Yoshihiko, taken 15 years ago with Shimizu and other members of her [Nihon buyo](#) dance class. “He was my student for 20 years and became extremely good at it,” Shimizu, 78, said. “He was good enough to take part every year in the national championships in Tokyo.”

Takashi, now 18, still struggles to articulate his feelings about the death of his parents. He prefaces his words with a glance at Shimizu, as if he is seeking her guidance on how to respond.

He is certain of one thing, though. “I think my mum and dad would be very proud of me for winning a place at university,” he says.

Yoshihiko, a car mechanic, passed on a love of engineering to his son, who excelled in maths and science at school. “My dad fixed engines for a living, but I want to build new ones, using new sources of energy. My dad said he wanted me to be ...” Takashi says, before trailing off.

After staying with relatives, Naho became despondent and returned to live with Shimizu but could not face returning to senior high school. Despite missing almost three years of classes she is studying art at a college in the city of Sendai.

The long-term welfare of the region’s traumatised children is causing concern among local authorities, as Rikuzentakata and other communities undertake massive reconstruction projects that will cost at least 26tn yen (\$232 bn) over the next few years.

In the flattened town centre a short drive from Shimizu’s home, cranes loom over a towering seawall - one of many that will line 400km of coast, for a total cost of around 820bn yen - while large mounds of flattened earth removed from a nearby mountain mark the areas where a new, elevated Rikuzentakata will take shape.



📷 Pictures of Takashi’s family and his junior high school graduation on display in his foster home. Photograph: Kazuma Obara/Guardian

While Rikuzentakata’s transformation from disaster zone to building site offers a glimmer of hope, not least to the 1,400 residents still living in temporary housing, the psychological wounds inflicted on the region’s children could take decades to heal.

In the three worst-hit prefectures of Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima, more than 230 children were orphaned; 1,580 lost either one or both parents. The tsunami created 42 orphans in Rikuzentakata and neighbouring Kesennuma, more than half of whom still live locally, according to Ichio Yamada, head of the city's board of education.

"The children feel very uneasy as the anniversary approaches, and many of them have flashbacks," Yamada said. "They had no time to prepare themselves for their parents' deaths - it wasn't like they were ill."

"Getting back to normal will take a very long time ... I wonder if it is even possible for them to get back to normal. A good education can at least give them the strength to move forward. Our job is to remind them that they are not alone."

Akemi Solloway, founder of the UK-based charity [Aid for Japan](#), which offers emotional, educational and financial support to orphans of the tsunami, described Rikuzentakata as a "great example of a community doing all it can to rebuild quickly and efficiently".

But she added: "There are still thousands of people living in temporary accommodation that remain dependent on donations, and hundreds of children that have been left in limbo."

"It's a strange thing to be an orphan in [Japan](#), not least of all because the adoption of children is very rare, so many people remain unaware that it's even a possibility. Foster care is also uncommon. This means that many of the children we work with are either entirely on their own or living with elderly grandparents, and are unlikely to ever find another home or family to care for them. Emotionally they are simply traumatised."

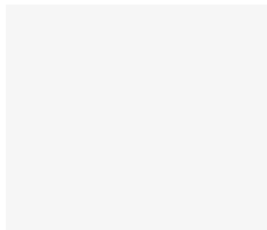
Like many other towns destroyed by the tsunami, Rikuzentakata is struggling to hold on to what little youthful promise it had, in a region that was already ageing faster than the rest of the country before the disaster.

Its tireless mayor, Futoshi Toba, believes the future rests on attracting young families to a new "fully inclusive" town, where 35% of the current population is aged over 65.



📷 The Guardian talks to key figures from the most critical days of the Fukushima crisis and to some of the tens of thousands forced to evacuate their irradiated communities.

"We need to address this by creating an environment in which people will want to get married and have children, and at the same time encourage people who moved away after the disaster to come back," said Toba, who watched helplessly from the roof of the town hall as the tsunami roared ashore.



He has been raising his two teenage sons alone after his wife, with whom he had spoken moments before the earthquake, was killed. "Most of all we need to create jobs to give our young adults a sense of purpose."

This summer work will begin on a shopping centre and restaurant, followed by a library and sports centre. "In the next two to three years the city will look very different," said Takanori Obayashi, an official in Rikuzentakata's planning department. "It's not just about rebuilding, but rebuilding better."

If Toba is to realise his vision he will need to enlist young people like Takashi, who admits that it will "be quite difficult" to return to Rikuzentakata after he graduates from university in Morioka, a city further inland.

But he adds: "I'd like people to come back to Rikuzentakata to keep the local culture alive and return it to the way it was before the tsunami. If I can use what I learn at university to make life easier for people here, then I'll be happy."

After playing in the garden with the family dog Chako - who survived after Yoshihiko took her to Shimizu's house immediately after the earthquake - Takashi recalls some fatherly advice the siblings could never have imagined would serve them so well as they embark on adulthood alone.

"I remember my dad being strict, but he never lost his temper. He was quiet and determined. Whenever I said I wanted to give up on something, he told me to just keep going."

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