

MollyMisek

s senior Natasha Mason stared at the television screen, watching in horror as millions of gallons of ocean water flooded the Japanese coastline and cities, she could only think of one thing: the Ohta family.

Unlike most other Americans who are currently following news coverage of the earthquake-tsunami disaster that destroyed a huge portion of Japan on March 11, Mason has a direct connection to the country.

With her father in the Navy, Mason has resided in Japan twice. In 1998, when she was just 5 years old, she and her family moved to Ikego, a small naval base seven miles away from the city of Yokosuka, for the first time.

Though it was a big adjustment, the Masons fit in well, making full use of their stay in Japan. Mason soon joined a Girl Scout troop, where she met Rie Ohta, a girl who was three years older than she. A bond was immediately formed between the two.

"We became best friends and so did our moms," Mason said.

The Ohtas and the Masons eventually grew close, and Mason struck up a friendship with Rie's little brother, Gen, who was Mason's age. Their father was "Japanese and very quiet," according to Mason, and their mother was

"American and hippie-ish."

Mason still recalls the feel of the knotted rope beneath her hands as she swung beneath the balcony of the Ohtas' house on their rope swing. She remembers Rie's and Gen's outgoing personalities, along with their above-average intelligences.

When her family moved back to America a year later, Mason took not only her memories of the Ohtas with her, but also the Japanese

'They have a lot of customs, and their culture is very intricate," Mason said.

It was, at times, difficult to adjust to life in America again. Luckily, the Masons went back for a second time in mid-2001, this time residing in Yokosuka after her dad was Naval Captain. However, of her younger sister's premature birth, the Masons moved back to the United States in March of 2002.

After leaving the Ohtas again, the Masons promised to keep in contact with their Japanese counterparts.

'My parents sent out the occasional email," Mason said. "I used to Facebook chat with Gen and Rie sophomore year in the very early morning, though the time difference was tricky to work around. After Facebook was banned at school, it became immensely difficult to keep in contact with them."

Still, they remained in her thoughts, though Mason never suspected something so devastating would happen to the citizens of

Footage of the earthquake and tsunami aftermath was at times too much for her to

"When I heard about the tsunami, I was devastated. I have a hard time watching the footage; I have cried while doing so," Mason said. "I initially wanted to go to Japan and

help, but the language barrier would be nearly impossible to overcome."

After hearing news of the disaster, Mason's family immediately sent emails to the Ohtas, making sure they were safe and offering assistance. However, the Masons received no replies for the first few days. This was mainly due to the massive power outage affecting urban parts of Japan.

"They lived around Yokohama, which is a pretty major city. It's close to Tokyo, though, so they didn't get any of the water damage," Mason said.

While she waited for the Ohtas to reply

in Japan, Mason communicated with Rie, who is currently a sophomore at Brown University in Rhode Island. "After this disaster I started Facebook creeping on them to see how they were," Mason said.

She tinany...
from Gen, along with his
mother and father. Though their
was limited, they She finally received word plan to travel to America, since Narita International Airport was taking flights at the time.

They also explained the hardships they faced in

According to Mason, "Gen's school has been shut down for the next two weeks, but my family is thinking that may be extended. What I heard through my parents' emails is that [the Ohtas] were running out of food."

Immediately, the Masons reached out by offering up their home to their longtime friends. will be coming," Mason said, "but the offer is still on the table if they RELIEF need it."

Currently, the Ohtas are visiting Rie at college, then heading to California and Colorado to visit other family members. Communication between the two families is still difficult, but Mason Communication hopes that she can reunite with her earliest friends for the first time in nearly a decade.

As for Japan's future, Mason speculates that the country's reconstruction will be quick and efficient. Despite predictions that the death toll will exceed 18,000, and,

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according to the World Bank, rebuilding the country will cost nearly \$235 billion, Mason remains hopeful.

"The Japanese are self-reliant, but they will ask for help when they need it. They'll try to get this mess cleaned up and back to normal as soon as possible," Mason said. "I doubt there will be any people living in FEMA type housing six or seven years after [the disaster]."

Mason continues to pray for the Ohtas and the people of Japan.

'When I think about all the children who have died, who were in school

or playing outside, I have a hard time comprehending the devastation," Mason

"I love that country. It's a second home to me; it's a part of me, and when I see the Japanese people in pain - though it sounds so cliche - it hurts me," she said.

As the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami continues to unfold, the Marian community is urged to give assistance to the Japanese in need. May we follow the example of Mason and her family, opening not only our wallets and doors, but our hearts as well.



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