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# Lives on Edge, Focused on the Quake Zone

By TIMOTHY WILLIAMS, A.G. SULZBERGER, and EMMA G. FITZSIMMONS

*With Japan reeling from serial disasters, worried relatives of Americans living there use love, prayer and, in some cases, money to deal from afar with the tragedy and stress.*

## Coordinating an Evacuation

FOR Mark Huston, getting his brother's family out of Sendai first meant persuading them that it was the right thing to do — and then, like thousands of other people, figuring out how to actually do it.

In the days immediately after the earthquake and the tsunami, Mr. Huston's brother, Chris Huston, and sister-in-law, Akiko Ujiie, who is eight months pregnant, were reluctant to flee with their 2-year-old son because that would have meant leaving Ms. Ujiie's elderly parents behind.

"They also thought things would get better soon and there were concerns about his wife flying that late in pregnancy," said Mr. Huston, who lives in New York City and is a consultant for the clothing company Diesel.

But once word spread that the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, about 50 miles south of Sendai, was leaking radiation, they decided it was best to leave.

Roads in and out of Sendai were impassible, though, so in the United States, Mr. Huston began making calls to see if he could hire a helicopter in Japan to fly his brother and his family out.

But every helicopter had been requisitioned by the Japanese government for rescue and relief. Eventually, Mr. Huston found a Florida company, Paramount Business Jets, that agreed to fly the family to Hong Kong on a nine-seat airplane for \$75,000.

Other airline companies were charging as much as \$125,000. "It seemed to be a bargain in relative terms," Mr. Huston said. "We're not a family that has ever chartered jets."

There were, however, complications: The Sendai airport was closed, the one they would be using in Tokyo was a six-hour drive under the best of circumstances, and Chris and his family would have only one tank of gas to get there, given fuel shortages.

There was one other thing: The drive would take them within about 45 miles of the Fukushima nuclear plant.

“We were extremely alarmed,” Mr. Huston said.

Other plans were feverishly hatched and just as quickly dropped, including driving west, to Yamigata, flying from there to Osaka, then to Tokyo, and then on to Kansas, where the Huston family lives.

Then, at a moment of particular desperation, the family remembered that Mr. Huston’s wife, Eva, 40, who had grown up in Edmond, Okla., had a childhood friend who had spent time in Japan with an American missionary. The family got the missionary’s mobile number. As it turned out, he was in Tokyo, and had colleagues in Sendai.

The missionary, Dan Iverson, agreed to drive a truck packed with fuel and food to Sendai, pick up the family and take them back to Tokyo for a flight to Minneapolis, where the family would make a connecting flight to Kansas City.

There was no guarantee that the truck would be allowed past military checkpoints on the road to Sendai. And packed with people and supplies, the van had little space for their belongings. Finally, the trip would take them past the nuclear power plant.

“It was something we had to do,” said Mr. Huston, who researched potassium iodide tablets, just in case.

Finally, on Friday afternoon, the family landed in Kansas City. Ms. Ujiie is due to give birth to a baby girl in about three weeks.

– *TIMOTHY WILLIAMS*

### **A Mother's Worry**

“DID you remember to take your contact lenses out?”

The question was directed from a worried mother to her faraway son, who confessed that no, he had not taken his contact lenses out.

“You can’t leave them in forever!” scolded the mother, Joanne Tohei.

Her son, Aki Tohei, explained that touching his eyes would be unsanitary. He was living in an apartment without electricity, gas or water, in a city where radiation dangers were growing increasingly pronounced, in a country reeling from the dual assault of earthquake and tsunami.

His hands were not clean.

It was the first time mother and son had spoken by telephone since the earthquake and tsunami struck Japan. And it was only then, days after the disaster, that Ms. Tohei realized that her normal expressions of motherly concern were inadequate to the severity of the moment. “He’s worried about survival, and I’m worried about his contact lenses,” she said.

Ms. Tohei, 69, lives in Chicago, not Japan. But like so many others around the world, she has also lived through the anxiety of the unfolding crisis, watching Japanese newscasts around the clock and obsessively checking her e-mail for the too-infrequent reports from her 35-year-old son, a high school English teacher who has lived in Japan for more than a decade.

“Maybe he wrote,” she tells herself countless times each day. So far the e-mails have arrived about every other day.

It is a helpless feeling, having only love and prayers to send, Ms. Tohei said. She has tried to temper her worry by maintaining the usual rhythm of her life. But occasionally she realizes how difficult it is to fully process this type of tragedy from afar. She is planning to help raise money for relief efforts. Her son, meanwhile, has shared the outlines of his life in the past week with his mother through his messages and the one phone conversation.

He was teaching in Fukushima when the earthquake struck. He stayed at the school until the last of the students was picked up, which was not until days later. Afterward, he returned to his apartment — eating packaged foods and drinking juice and soda from vending machines — until he decided to leave the city as radiation concerns grew more serious. He drove to another city, where he is staying with friends.

In each e-mail he asks her not to worry. She refuses. “I’m a mother,” she says.

— *A. G. SULZBERGER*

### **Call of Joy**

FOR a week after the earthquake and the tsunami struck Japan, Cynthia Clemons-Young was crossing her fingers, waiting to hear from her son Edward, who taught English at a school in one of the hardest-hit cities on the country’s northeast coast.

In search of information about her son, she called the Japanese Consulate and elected officials. She kept her laptop open on the sofa to constantly refresh a Web site listing American teachers who had been found. But mostly, she sat in her living room watching images of the disaster unfold on television.

The worst moment, she said, was when news stations reported that people who had survived were still in danger. There were fires, crumbling buildings, strong aftershocks and even forecasts of snow.

“I thought, ‘Oh my God, my baby is sleeping outside,’ ” Ms. Clemons-Young said in an interview at her home on Chicago’s South Side. “From the looks of it, they had people sleeping on top of the roofs of schools. I thought, ‘Is that him up there?’ ”

“I did break down at some points, and then I thought, ‘I’ve got to stay positive,’ ” she said.

And then on Friday morning, her son called home. He said he was doing fine and had been staying in the school in the coastal city of Kesennuma, where he taught. “I screamed,” she said. “I was just so happy.”

Her son, Edward Clemons, 25, had decided to teach in Japan after studying there during college, Ms. Clemons-Young said. She was proud when he quickly learned the language, and had planned to visit him in June. Those plans are less certain now.

Ms. Clemons-Young said their 20-minute conversation on Friday gave her an immense sense of relief. “I never gave up,” she said. “I had faith that he was going to be O.K.”

– *EMMA G. FITZSIMMONS*