



Bert Wilson, manager of the Ben Franklin Crafts store in Hilo, shown at work, returned recently from a trip to Japan to provide aid to the victims of last year's earthquake and tsunami.

HUNTER BISHOP/  
Tribune-Herald

# Helping out Japan

## Big Isle firms take part in tsunami-relief missions

By **HUNTER BISHOP**  
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Several big-hearted Hawaii companies are continuing to send aid and aloha to tsunami victims in Japan. And they're being delivered with a smile.

Sixteen months after the earthquake and tsunami which destroyed entire cities and left nearly 20,000 people dead or missing, a delegation including executives from Hawaii Ace Hardware and Ben Franklin Crafts stores on Oahu, Maui and the Big Island, returned last month from their second humanitarian mission to the disaster-stricken northeast coast of Japan.

Ace Hardware Chief Financial Officer Milton Fujii said that from the first news of the disaster, company officials desired a more direct, hands-on approach to their efforts than just sending cash to a relief agency. Company co-owner Wayne Kamitaki, a Hilo resident, helped spearhead the effort. Officials began searching immediately for a way to get their donations to where they were needed most. Mizoguchi called a company partner in Tokyo, Yoshiteru Yamada, who had already established contacts with some of the most devastated communities.

Yamada and friends in Japan had taken it upon themselves to bring aid to the tsunami zone and unofficially adopted the city of Rikuentakata, as many others have done in Japan with other communities. "He just went to help and ended up there," said Fujii. "There are numerous sites like this all over the area. He's made regular trips since the tsunami."

The Ace Hardware-Ben Franklin Crafts ohana then joined forces with Honolulu-based businessman Chuck Graft of the Foreign Buyers Club in Japan, who was also initiating relief efforts. Graft started the FBC 20 years ago to help the American community in Japan get the things from home that

they missed the most.

Fujii joined both trips, last year with Ace Hardware co-owner Paul Mizoguchi, and the one just completed last month, which included Hilo Ace Hardware store Manager Bert Wilson. The first time they visited Ishinomaki in the Sendai region, where Fujii and Mizoguchi spent five days sharing their time and aloha to help rebuild fallen cities and broken lives. Last month, the delegation including Wilson returned from a two-day stay at Yamada's "adopted" Rikuzentakata, a small city in Iwate prefecture, almost five hours by train and car from Tokyo with a population of more than 23,000 just two years ago.

Today, a few hundred residents live in 84 government-supplied housing units, each about the size of a two-car garage on the former site of a junior high school. The tsunami destroyed practically everything in its path, leaving a thick carpet of rubble across the landscape where the bustling city once stood.

"They were really appreciative," Wilson said. "We threw a pizza party, made Spam musubi for them, and they were so receptive they just jumped in to help."

The next day they built picnic tables for the community center with the materials and tools they brought with them. "We showed them how to use the power tools," which were left behind, Fujii said.

Later Wilson was invited to one of the modular homes to teach some of the women how to cook Spam, which was funny to Wilson. "I don't know how to cook," he said, laughing. But even through the language barrier, he got them started with a little oil in the pan. Then as his kitchen skills became all too evident, one of his hosts gently and graciously took the chop sticks from his hands and completed the task.

"We were fortunate to have a

translator, a Dr. Sato, who serves primarily as a post-tsunami stress counselor," Wilson said. "She mainly just listens, he said. "They have that need to tell their stories."

Most troubling right now is "uncertainty" about their future, Wilson said. The government has notified them they have only two years to remain in the temporary housing with the deadline only months away.

"They don't know what's going to happen to them," Fujii said. "There's not a lot they can do. More than 90 percent of the businesses in the town are gone. There's one small market, some convenience stores and gas stations.

"Realistically what they need is time to heal."

Wilson was amazed at the reception his delegation received. "We were privileged. They used their resources to entertain us. That was very gracious. They were more concerned about us. We didn't expect that."

"Last year they took tents, grills, tarps, gloves, (then) we shipped hardware — ladders, shovels, tools — things people needed to rebuild," Fujii said. He estimated the cost of the effort at close to \$100,000, donated almost entirely by the company.

"With so many Japanese residents and visitors in Hawaii, Japan is close to our hearts and we feel it is our duty to give back to the community," said Mizoguchi. "I am proud to have aided in some small way."

"They are so, so grateful," he said. "Words cannot express. The smiles and gestures, it's very hard to explain. You see in their faces what they went through."

Yet most impressive is that the remaining residents of Rikuentakata gave back more to their visitors. "Every place we went they gave back. Even though we were there to give to them. We said, 'please don't,' but it's hard to say no. It's really touching."