

The Kamaishi Miracle

A CONVERSATION WITH KAZUYO FUKUDA*

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When the devastating tsunami triggered by the Great East Japan Earthquake engulfed the town of Kamaishi, something extraordinary happened in what has become known as “The Kamaishi Miracle”. All 184 students of the local elementary school survived. Although they were beyond adult supervision, the children scattered to safety, leading little ones and urging adults to evacuate. The programme recounts their experience in a combination of animation (anime style) documentary footage and interviews with witnesses and experts.

The Kamaishi Miracle presents a very interesting way of dealing with a highly emotional event. What was your approach in terms of finding a good balance?

Fukuda: *The Kamaishi Miracle* is a documentary based on the testimonies of children. Many children witnessed the great tsunami and we were hesitant about asking them questions about the disaster. However the children were keen to tell their story saying, “We want to pass on our experiences to other children, and help them protect their own life in the future.” We talked with the families and teachers about the psychological state of each child before conducting the interviews. And we only interviewed children who were confirmed strong enough to go through with it. As we wanted as many children to watch the program and inspire them to think about disaster preparedness in their communities, we decided to use animation instead of reenactment drama to reconstruct their stories (cf. Ill. 1). To enhance the educational impact, we also incorporated “The 3 Rules of

Survival” made by professor Katada, Kamaishi’s disaster prevention advisor. We tried not to make the program too educational, because the children might turn the channel if they think they are being educated.

You put children in the center and make them the hero(in)es of the stories. How did you come to this decision?

Fukuda: There are 3 reasons for this. First, while there are so many TV programs about the Great East Japan Earthquake, very few of them were addressed to children. Second, we thought children will be more emotionally engaged in our documentary if the main characters were children of their age. And third, we thought that the fact that such small children survived and saved many lives with their own judgment and courage would surely inspire not only children, but also adults.

What were the biggest challenges in concept and production?

Fukuda: There was no opposition about the idea of making a documentary about the Great East Japan Earthquake based on the children’s testimonies and using animation.

The biggest challenge for us was whether to use the actual footage of the tsunami. We were worried about traumatizing the children. So we asked the children who we interviewed, “You wouldn’t want us to use the actual tsu-



Ill. 1: *The Kamaishi Miracle* recounts how 184 students from an elementary school survived the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011

nami images, right?” But surprisingly, all the children said, “The terror and devastation of the tsunami cannot be shown without the actual images. The images must be included!” However, to prevent giving children a shock, the length and frequency of the images was reduced to a minimum, and we inserted a warning telop¹ saying “Tsunami image will be shown soon” before the images were shown.

Japan is a country prone to natural disasters, and there are predictions that we may have great earthquakes and tsunami in the near future. We made this program asking ourselves what we can do as TV producers to help save the lives of children. ■

NOTE

¹ The term “telop” is used in Japan to indicate text which is superimposed on the screen, e.g. tickers, captions or subtitles.

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