

Ambassador Ishikawa, thank you very much for your generosity in hosting this reception.

For the last five years, my home was a small town called Kawamata, in the north-east of Fukushima Prefecture.

Now, living anywhere in Japan is an amazing experience. But for me, and (I'm sure) for most of my fellow returning JETs, there was nothing more amazing than just living as part of my community, and spending every day with the most incredible children in the whole world. To be given this opportunity is the real gift of the JET Programme, and one for which I will always be grateful.

Of course, there are some things you just can't prepare for. That was never more true than during the events of 2011. The Great East Japan Earthquake, and all of its consequences, made life very difficult for many people. For me, though, the most difficult part wasn't the damage, or the shortages, or even the concerns over radiation. It was watching my students and their families being forced to abandon their homes, not knowing when they might be able to return.

Part of my community was a beautiful little mountain village called Yamakiya. It was tiny, but its culture was rich, its people were friendly and warm, and the schools there were incredibly small and close-knit. It was, honestly, one of my favourite places in the whole world. Two months after the earthquake, it was ordered evacuated. Now it lies empty.

Before I left Japan, I went up to Yamakiya by myself. That charming little village is now eerily quiet. The buildings are dark, the fields overgrown. As I walked around the closed and shuttered junior high school building, where I have so many wonderful memories, I made a promise: one day, I shall see that village again as it should be, full of life, and happiness, and hope for the future.

I never felt closer to the people of Fukushima than I did in that spring of 2011. I wasn't a guest anymore, but a member of the community. Yes, my first home is Canada. But I have a second home now: a little town tucked into a river valley just outside Fukushima City. I think my fellow returning JETs will understand what I mean.

I'll miss so many things about Japan. But most of all, I'll miss the people of Fukushima. I'll miss all the friends I left behind. I'll miss my teachers and coworkers. I'll miss all the people of my community. And, more than anything else, I'll miss – I do miss – my amazing students.

Thank you very much.