Tōhoku, Nearly Seven Years Later
by Bruce Deaner, Haas ’94

The shattered water made a misty din.
Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before.

From “Once by the Pacific,” Robert Frost (1928)

This past December, I led a group of Boy Scouts on a weekend service project in the Tōhoku region of Japan; we traveled from Tokyo to a coastal town in Miyagi Prefecture called Yamamoto-cho that was ravaged by a massive tsunami on March 11, 2011. For the fifth consecutive year, the scouts of Troop 5 made the 5-hour trip to support the Saitos, an aging farming couple whose land and livelihood were swept away on that fateful day.

Media coverage of the region’s plight has dwindled in recent years, and even here in Japan, memories of the disaster are fading. It’s hard to fathom just how massive the tsunami was, but here are a few facts (from livescience.com) to help provide some perspective:

- The tsunami was up to 40 meters (about 130 feet) tall
- The tsunami water flowed 10 km (about 6 miles) inland, engulfing entire cities and flooding 560 square kilometers (more than 200 square miles) of land
- More than 18,000 people lost their lives
- An estimated 5 million tons of property - buildings, furniture, appliances, cars, boats, etc. were swept into the ocean

Over the weekend, as we helped the Saitos clear their field in preparation for winter, we had the chance to speak with members of the community who stopped by, amazed to see a group of visitors in uniforms in the fields dismantling trellises and uprooting dead plants. Everyone we met shared their personal stories of family and friends lost in the tsunami and how tough it still is to survive in the area, particularly since many government redevelopment decisions are delayed due to uncertainty about ongoing safety in an area prone to tsunami disasters. These people have nowhere else to go - most lost everything they owned and now have only their skills and the community to rely on.

This year we saw some heartening signs of progress - a handful of new houses ready for those fortunate enough to afford them, and rows of huge greenhouses set up to enable year-round farming. However, we were also confronted with the reality that some things
have probably changed forever and that recovery for those who live here remains a
distant dream. Massive tracts of land in low-lying areas remain uninhabited and
deforested. Entire towns and extensive areas of farmland were impacted by the
Fukushima Dai-Ichi reactor meltdown, less than 100km to the south of Yamamoto-cho,
and remain evacuated due to radioactive contamination. Cleanup will take decades. As of
2017, more than 150,000 people are still displaced, having lost their homes to the
tsunami and/or the radiation, and more than 50,000 of those are still living in temporary
housing - mainly prefab structures which were not designed to be used for anywhere near
this length of time.

The people of Tohoku remain determined to get their lives back. Through their efforts they
are gradually making progress rebuilding businesses and reclaiming the land. Some are
moving into new homes. I hope this spirit remains strong, and those that have lost and
suffered so much can again live in security and comfort.