

# Spreading Hiroshima's Spirit of Peace

by Tomoko Watanabe, Executive Director of ANT-Hiroshima

## The A-bomb Experience

I was born in 1953, eight years after the atomic bombing. My parents are A-bomb survivors.

During my childhood, the scars of the war and the atomic bombing were everywhere and became part of our daily lives.

I grew up in a large family of 15 and learned the importance of family ties and compassion for others. One day, when I was 20, my grandfather was working in the fields and suffered a stroke. He died right in front of me. He had been the patriarch of our family and his loss shook me deeply. I began to question the meaning of life, and death, pondering my purpose on earth. It was the first time that I felt keenly aware of the fact that I was born in Hiroshima to parents who were survivors of the atomic bomb.

When Hiroshima was attacked, in August 1945, my father was 27. He was riding on a train that had stopped at the city's main station. This shielded him from the bomb's heat rays so he wasn't burned alive when the bomb exploded.

My mother was 15 at the time. She was a student at the Red Cross nursing school, and managed to survive the blast by quickly diving under her desk.

My father wouldn't tell me about his experience of the bombing in any detail, but I recall one story where he gave some oil to the survivors to help treat their burns. His words still come back to me: "There was nothing we could do but keep on going, keep on living."

My mother wouldn't discuss her experience of the bombing, either. But when I was in college, I organized a screening of a film about Hiroshima. At that point, she slowly began sharing her account with me. She told me about a classmate who couldn't be rescued from the wreckage of the building; a baby crying in its dying mother's arms in front of the Red Cross hospital; a patient she helped carry from his hospital bed; the relief efforts she made, without rest, to assist the survivors.

And as I heard these moving stories from my mother, and from others, I became motivated to learn more about the atomic bombing and the significance of Hiroshima. I even decided to make this the subject of my graduate thesis. For my research, I spent many hours listening to the accounts of people who were part of Hiroshima's history. From them, and their way of living, I was able to learn so much. I gained the courage to endure difficulties and the firm belief that we must never give up.

The more familiar I became with Hiroshima's A-bomb experience, the more profound its meaning grew. I came to feel that I wanted Hiroshima to be at the heart of my work for the rest of my life. And ever since, hand in hand with many others, I have pursued activities which I hope can impact people's lives for the better while spreading Hiroshima's spirit of peace.

## **Destruction and Rebirth**

On August 6, 1945, at 8:15 a.m., an atomic bomb exploded above the city of Hiroshima. It is estimated that, out of a population of roughly 350,000 at the time, about 140,000 people were dead by the end of December 1945. Among the victims, along with Japanese residents, were people from a variety of other nations, including around a dozen American POWs.

This widespread death toll and destruction was caused by a number of factors, which combined to create a staggering catastrophe:

1. The heat rays from the huge fireball in the sky charred human flesh and ignited fires throughout the city center.
2. The blast released a shock wave which blew people into the air like rag dolls, toppled buildings, and sent shattered glass and debris flying like projectiles.
3. People were exposed to the radiation emitted by the bomb, poisoning their bodies and creating a range of damaging effects which have lasted to this day. Those in the city suffered primary exposure to the radiation, while others, who entered the city in the aftermath, experienced secondary exposure.

Despite the overwhelming destruction left by the world's first nuclear attack, the survivors of Hiroshima, along with generous support from other parts of Japan and from the world, were able to gradually reconstruct the city through the postwar period. At the same time, Hiroshima was transformed from a military city to a city of peace, which has come to serve as a touchstone for peace in the world.

Behind Hiroshima's rebirth were three key factors:

1. Human dignity was restored through efforts to meet basic needs, including shelter, clothing, food, water, medical care, meaningful work, and the personal expression of opinions and emotions.
2. Hope rose again, and a positive outlook grew, as the war came to an end; nature itself showed new life with trees, plants, and flowers growing amid the ruins; support arrived from others, near and far; and the beauty of life could again be appreciated through music, the arts, sports, and social activities.
3. The reconstruction of the city was realized through a national law and funds which facilitated the reconstruction work, assistance from other parts of Japan and overseas, and a vision for transforming Hiroshima into a city of peace, with Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park at the heart of this effort.

Meanwhile, the survivors of the atomic bombing were able to overcome their own suffering to promote the abolition of nuclear weapons and war for the sake of the whole human race. As witnesses to the horror of nuclear arms, their voices have been vital in the worldwide campaign to eliminate these weapons from the earth.

## **A Fortress of Peace**

However, the number of A-bomb survivors, as well as those who witnessed the process of reconstructing the city after the war, has been declining steadily as the years pass. Hiroshima has an important mission, which is to hand down the survivors' experiences to future generations, and prevent the memory of the horrific destruction from fading in people's minds.

This mission consists of the following five actions:

1. Convey the reality of the A-bomb damage to people in Japan and around the world
2. Make efforts to advance the goal of abolishing nuclear weapons from the earth
3. Pursue peace-building activities in places of need
4. Promote peace education and peace culture
5. Develop new generations of peace builders

These are large aims, and they can only be advanced with the people of the world working together, each doing their own small part.

When I was writing my thesis, I received a lot of good advice on this point from a man named Seiichi Nakano. He was a professor at Hiroshima University during the time of the city's reconstruction, and he opened his home to children who became orphaned as a consequence of the atomic bombing. The "Ayumi Group" was Professor Nakano's effort to care for these children in place of their parents. With a warm heart, he considered how best the children could live, and he did everything he could for them.

The motto of the Ayumi Group was "take baby steps together" and "peace is part of daily life." Professor Nakano cherished human ties and was often heard to say, "Build a fortress of peace in your mind." His words, and the way of life he and his wife led, have strongly influenced the person I am today.

In order to find peace in our daily lives, we need to reflect on whether the state of our minds, our behavior, and our relationships with others are peaceful or not. At the same time, the words "take baby steps together" encourage us to move forward with others by our side, even if our pace is slow. And as we pursue Hiroshima's mission, we mustn't forget the task of building that "fortress of peace" in our minds, the same aim that Professor Nakano held for the Ayumi Group.

Through my work, I've met many young people who want to learn more about the world today and help build a better world for tomorrow. I hope they will take steps to put their enthusiasm into action. By being proactive, the world around you can change. And don't be afraid of failure; you can learn a lot from your mistakes, lessons that will enable you to grow and become more effective.

If you continue your efforts--even if those efforts seem very small--your network of like-minded people, and the impact of your work, will expand. This is exactly the thinking behind my organization, ANT-Hiroshima.

## **ANT-Hiroshima's Work**

ANT-Hiroshima, an NGO based in Hiroshima, Japan, draws its inspiration from the experience of the A-bomb survivors who, together with international support, worked to rebuild their shattered city in a spirit of peace and reconciliation. In a similar spirit, ANT-Hiroshima is involved in a range of international peace activities, international cooperation activities, and educational activities.

In one sense, "ANT" denotes the insect because the name represents our belief that, as individuals, our power is small, but by working together, we can move the world. At the same time, it stands for "Asian Network of Trust." We believe that the foundation for all our activities is the feeling of trust between people.

In 2013, ANT-Hiroshima marked its 25th year. Highlights of our work over the past quarter-century include:

### **International Peace Activities**

#### **Supporting international efforts for nuclear abolition and peace-building**

Pursuing a vision both local and global in scope, ANT-Hiroshima is a strong supporter of organizations and individuals seeking to abolish nuclear weapons and promote peace in the world, including Mayors for Peace and writers, journalists, and peace activists.

#### **Producing films and DVDs about A-bomb survivors**

ANT-Hiroshima has served as consulting producer for two award-winning documentaries by U.S. filmmaker Steven Okazaki: "White Light/Black Rain" and "The Mushroom Club." In our efforts to record the past for future generations, we have also produced a series of DVDs which feature the life stories of A-bomb survivors and sufferers of war.

#### **Donating "Sadako" books to the world**

ANT-Hiroshima has produced two children's books about the life of Sadako Sasaki, a girl from Hiroshima who died of leukemia, an aftereffect of radiation from the atomic bomb. These books are available in a wide range of languages and thousands of copies have been donated to nations around the world, particularly in places hit by conflict or disaster. Sadako's story, with its message of courage and hope, is an inspiration to the hearts of children everywhere.

#### **Establishing the Green Legacy Hiroshima Initiative**

In cooperation with UNITAR, ANT-Hiroshima has established the Green Legacy Hiroshima Initiative to spread the seeds and saplings of A-bombed trees to places throughout the world. The planting and growth of new generations of A-bombed trees serves to promote Hiroshima's spirit of peace.

#### **Supporting peace efforts in Mindanao, the Philippines**

ANT-Hiroshima is an active partner in peace education efforts in Mindanao, helping to create "Peace Crane Centers" in secondary schools to cultivate peace culture among young people in the area.

## **International Cooperation Activities**

### **Constructing a new health care facility in Pakistan**

In cooperation with HOPE '87-Pakistan and other organizations, we helped construct a new health care facility in the Shamshatoo District, located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, for Afghan refugees and local Pakistanis. The successful outcome of this project can be attributed to the trust-building that took place over 12 years of efforts.

### **Sponsoring an elementary school in Kashmir**

ANT-Hiroshima has provided financial support for the operating costs of Sadako Primary School, a school inspired by the story of Sadako Sasaki and constructed by the Sadako Foundation, a Pakistani NGO, in the wake of the devastating earthquake that struck Pakistan in 2005.

### **Constructing a new water system in Mindanao, the Philippines**

We also provided financial support for the construction of a new water system and sanitary facilities in Lanao Province, a project pursued by RIDO Incorporated to help address poverty and conflict in the area. The shared need for safe water and sanitation among all parties serves as a vehicle for cooperation and trust-building.

### **Providing support for victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake**

ANT-Hiroshima has played a central role in coordinating support from Hiroshima organizations for the relief and reconstruction efforts in eastern Japan following the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011. This support, intended to address the physical and psychological needs of those affected by the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster, includes assistance to displaced families and individuals who have left the area and resettled in Hiroshima.

### **Organizing Art Party, a benefit art exhibition**

For ten years, starting in 2003, ANT-Hiroshima organized Art Party, a benefit art exhibition held annually in Hiroshima. Every December, artwork created by children in need from countries around the world—each time, about 300 pictures from 15 countries—was displayed and sold at a large gallery and 100% of the proceeds were returned to the participating children's groups as a donation. Art Party was not only a fundraising effort, it was a way to use art to advance global education.

## **Educational Activities**

### **Facilitating scholarships for education**

ANT-Hiroshima is involved in facilitating scholarships between financial supporters and student-recipients. Candidates for ANT scholarships show exceptional promise in making use of their intended studies to bring benefit to the world in some way.

### **Organizing peace education and peace culture activities**

ANT-Hiroshima organizes a variety of activities to promote peace education and peace culture, such as: arranging lectures, workshops, film screenings, concerts, and art exhibitions with peace-related themes; coordinating exchange projects for students; and supporting groups of young people involved in their own peace activities.

### **Arranging internships and volunteer experiences**

ANT-Hiroshima is involved in arranging internships and volunteer experiences, both at the ANT-Hiroshima office and at other locations in Hiroshima and internationally.

### **Providing professional services in educational settings**

As the executive director of ANT-Hiroshima, I frequently serve as a lecturer in schools, a workshop facilitator for groups, and a media commentator.

### **Resources**

[ANTNews.Hiroshima-Nagasaki.net](http://ANTNews.Hiroshima-Nagasaki.net)

[ANT-Hiroshima.org](http://ANT-Hiroshima.org)