FINDING NEW VALUE IN FUKUSHIMA’S DORMANT RESOURCES

Business trips took KOBAYASHI Miai to Fukushima, where she encountered bountiful nature and lifestyles that changed her perceptions and led her to become an entrepreneur. There, she devised a way to distribute so-called "sun-" (for “sun”) and "people" (hitotbo) and "kaki" — a name that combines the Japanese words for “sun” (hi), “people” (hitobito, sequentially voiced as hito) and "kaki" — a major product of the region. The place that she chose was Kunimi, a town where she felt at home. She spoke with the farmers there to learn about their problems, and began by focusing on the distribution of peaches, a major product of the region. Ordinary distributors do not accept substandard produce: that is, fruit of the wrong size or shape, or with slightly blemished skin. Kobayashi bought such peaches directly from farmers, then devised a system that made the fruit available to city consumers at a reasonable price, together with messages from the producers and other pertinent information. Her next focus was on "anpo-gaki" (luscious semi-dried persimmons), another well-known product of Kunimi. The fruit is peeled before drying, with the peels normally being thrown away, but Kobayashi learned that these peels are endowed with deodorant and antiseptic qualities. She then spent three years developing kaki-based skin-care products for women’s intimate areas, and successfully brought them to the market in January 2020. It was an idea that came to her because she herself had been prone to skin problems whenever she felt emotionally or physically stressed by her formerly irregular lifestyle.

The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) recognized Hito Hirobo two years in a row for a subsidy initiative known as the Demonstration Project for Femtech and Similar Support Services. This autumn, Hito Hirobo is set to launch an “active-learning” demonstration project aimed at businesses enterprises, with the goal of removing unconscious biases regarding women’s minds and bodies. “I think femtech will be the trump card for achieving diversity and inclusion,” asserts Kobayashi.

The people of Kunimi say that “work means working for the family” and that “children aren’t supposed to be raised, they grow up naturally.” Such words motivated Kobayashi to rethink her own ideas about work and life.

It was a tingly feeling—the kind you get when you meet someone you want to spend the rest of your life with. In any case, it felt like home. That is how KOBAYASHI Miai describes her encounter with Kunimi, a small town of around 9,000 in Fukushima Prefecture, where she launched a startup called “Hitobito”—a name that combines the Japanese words for “people” (hitobito, sequentially voiced as hito) and "kaki," peels are said to contain substances leading her to establish a business on a regular basis, she eventually decided to launch her own business. “I can do more for Fukushima,” she reasoned. “I can do something the region really needs, on my own initiative.” She was confident in the skills that she had gained through her work with the government and the consulting firm.

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"We want to build an environment in which all women can cherish the balance of their own minds and bodies.”

Kobayashi believed in her own potential and cleared a path for herself. Her energy is as bright as the sun and lights the way toward a shining future for women in Fukushima and in Japan as a whole.

Earthquake (officially termed the Great East Japan Disaster) struck the northeast of the country. She then took a leave of absence to engage in volunteer rubble-cleaning work in post-disaster Tohoku (a hard-hit region in northern Japan), but collapsed from exhaustion and became painfully aware that the only way to be of any use to the region was to “do something [she is] really good at.” Four years later, Kobayashi switched careers and started working for a consulting firm, where she could assist regional businesses on the ground in finding solutions. She actively began volunteering for jobs involving post-disaster reconstruction in the devastated areas of Fukushima Prefecture. Visiting the prefecture on a regular basis, she eventually decided to launch her own business. “I can do more for Fukushima,” she reasoned. “I can do something the region really needs, on my own initiative.” She was confident in the skills that she had gained through her work with the government and the consulting firm.

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