

The Road to Revival

It's Not Just Mud – A British Man Supporting Recovery in Tsunami-Affected Areas

“It was terrible, like a scene from *The Terminator*, but after judgment day! I can still clearly remember how it looked. It’s difficult to explain, but it was as if the whole town was a snow globe that had been shaken, and all the houses and cars were snowflakes.” So says Jamie El-Banna, a British man who was teaching English in Osaka at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake. Immediately after the earthquake he decided to volunteer in Tohoku and in late May 2011, just over two months after the disaster took place, he got the chance to go to the affected areas.

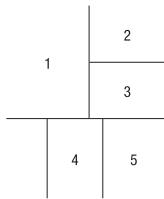
He worked to clear out mud and clean up buildings with a group made up of English teachers and U.S. Marine volunteers, who had assembled via social media. During this period, Jamie posted updates and photos on his blog as well as on Facebook and Twitter. This material was mainly written for his own sake, as a way to process what he was experiencing, but it inspired a huge response.

After a week of volunteer work, Mr. El-Banna returned to Osaka, but he soon realized that he wanted to go back to Tohoku, and headed two weeks later to Ishinomaki, a city that had been devastated by the tsunami in Miyagi Prefecture. While taking on any work that needed doing — which usually resulted in his being covered in mud — he also continued to report what was happening on social media, following the advice of fellow volunteers who said it was important to keep letting the world know what life was like in Ishinomaki. One day he was contacted by some of his readers in Japan and abroad who were interested in volunteering, and he urged them to come and join him. And from that point on, people kept on coming. After a while, a small village of 20 tents stood around his own.

El-Banna also became friends with many local people, in particular Nobuko Hashimoto, or Hashimoto Mama, as she came to be known. A mother figure, Hashimoto Mama would prepare delicious home-cooked food for volunteers every day. “After eating such delicious food, you would feel that you really needed to work hard to earn it!”

Throughout his time in Tohoku, El-Banna was often asked a question that sounded odd to him, “Why are you working so hard for Japan even though you are not from the country?” He replied: “Who cares about that? Japanese or foreign, we’re all human. I live in Japan; it’s only natural to help.”

Finally, when asked what gives him the motivation to continue his work, he says, as if it’s self-evident, “I don’t have any special motivation. I just do it because I want to. If you do something you love, it doesn’t feel like work.”



1. Clearing mud from a roadside ditch
 2. Jamie's tent on a university sports field in Ishinomaki
 3. Mud-covered volunteers (Jamie is second from left)
 4. Enjoying lunch prepared by Hashimoto Mama
 5. Smiling while answering an interview question

Jamie El-Banna

Chairman of It's Not Just Mud (INJM), supporting reconstruction activity.

