Alaska students study disaster preparedness in Iwate, where alumnus died in 2011 tsunami

By KAZUMASA SUGIMURA/ Staff Writer

RIKUZENTAKATA, Iwate Prefecture—An American affectionately called "Monty Sensei" (Teacher Monty), who died here in the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, is the inspiration for a program to study disaster preparation measures between U.S. and Japanese universities.

The program, which started on May 9, involves 10 students from the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) and 12 from Iwate University.

Montgomery Dickson, a 26-year-old UAA graduate, died in the tsunami caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, while working in Rikuzentakata as an assistant English teacher. His death led to the establishment of the program.

The participants first visited the Rikuzentakata city government office and heard stories about Monty Sensei from members of the municipal board of education at the time of the disaster.

Dickson, who taught English in elementary and junior high schools for about one and a half years, dreamed of becoming a Japanese language teacher. He had positive interactions with local residents, including participating in local festivals, and was kind to children.

“He cherished many people and was loved by many people,” said one of the former members of the board of education.

Alaska suffered devastation from an extremely powerful magnitude-9.2 earthquake on March 27, 1964. The program is aimed at promoting the study of measures that can be taken in local areas to prepare for disasters.

In the talks with Rikuzentakata Mayor Futoshi Toba, students asked him questions in succession.

One said, “What conditions are necessary to establish evacuation centers?” Another asked, “How tall will the sea walls be?” Another asked, “What approach will you take for people in weaker conditions (such as the elderly and people with disabilities)?”

After the discussion, the students visited areas damaged by the tsunami.

One of the UAA students experienced a hurricane in Florida in 2004 when she was living there. The 35-year-old student, who is majoring in international relations, said that she wants to use what she learns in the program in the crisis management field in the future.

She added that she wants to share Japan’s disaster preparedness measures in the United States and also produce new ideas there.

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