

MRS. MINAKO SUGANO



Date of birth:
January 15, 1974

Currently living in:
Date City, Fukushima
prefecture, 19km north-
east of Fukushima City
Central

Originally lived in:
Date City, Fukushima
prefecture

Profession: former
kindergarten teacher

Married, two sons (10,6),
one daughter (7)

Grey jeans, a blue and grey striped hoody and lamb wool shorts are drying on a silver bar in Minako Sugano's living room: clothes belonging to her three children.

Mrs. Sugano doesn't dry them outside. "It's not safe."

Mrs. Sugano and her family evacuated from one contaminated part of Date City to another, after their original house was designated as a "special evacuation recommendation point" at the beginning of July 2011. The Sugano family are so-called "voluntary evacuees". "We have been in an emergency situation for the last three years. I cannot understand why we are still left in this."

She describes the disconcerting details: "The radiation levels around our house were checked in April 2011. There were hotspots. We expected an evacuation order. Nothing happened for three months. Then we got the notice and could choose whether to evacuate or not. I could not stay any longer. I had to protect my children."

Mrs. Sugano tried to explain the inexplicable to them. "There is this thing called radiation. It's dangerous.' I showed them the notice from the city. They were not convinced. My oldest son cried. He did not want to leave, asked 'What are we going to do with our house, with grandmother, with our dog?' In the end, I convinced him to go." Her mother-in-law and the dog stayed. Her husband still has a job in the city. That's why the family didn't move far away, just from one contaminated place to a less contaminated one.

Mrs. Sugano reflects on when the outside was a bucolic place and not a safety threat. "I always wanted to raise my kids in nature, by the mountains." She remembers those joyful days, long gone now. "Our happiest time before the disaster was when we walked outside. We did that every time the kids came home from school. It was our little time. Now we only do things in the house. That is very difficult." A lot of things are an ongoing challenge. "Almost everything we did before the disaster to reduce stress became impossible to do. We have to stay in the house so much." The whole situation started to impact her children. "I can see the difference. They are uneasy, stressed, cannot relax, find it difficult to concentrate on one thing."

Together, the whole family is striving for some ease. Her kids “try to take care of us parents. They try to make funny jokes, try to cheer me up.” She also tries to make life easier for them and doesn’t give up. “I am trying harder to be more cheerful, accept reality and adjust our life to it. I am not thinking about my own stress, only the children’s.”

At the beginning of 2013, she accidentally found out that the evacuation recommendation for her house was lifted. The authorities told her to come back. She refused. She doesn’t want to expose her children to the authorities’ arbitrary assessment of safety. The recommendations are negotiated between the central government and local municipalities. There is a lot at stake, since they reflect the potential reputations of regions. Permitted radiation levels are higher in some places than others. Her old house is in a higher area. Mrs. Sugano criticises the different regard for children’s health. In March 2013, her victim’s compensation was cut.

After the evacuation, there was no government support to transport children to their original schools. To provide some continuity for her son, she quit her job and drove him to his old school every day. “I didn’t want to hurt my children anymore.” Then the government granted some support. When it was cut, she decided to change schools. Her oldest son despaired, got a high fever and was hospitalised. When the taxi support to the old school started again, he was enraged, called the education committee and complained about having had to change schools. Mrs. Sugano is proud of her children, “that they can express their feelings and go forward, if they feel something is right.”

But: “It feels like it is almost dark and there is no light. I try to find things in the dark,” she continues. “I need to learn more and started to check on the internet. I use Twitter and Facebook now to communicate with others. That removes the stress from me. As a family, we all talk about it. That helps.”

Her wish for the future is that her children are healthy. The lack of protection for children still outrages her. “Not everyone needs to have mother’s eyes. But there needs to be a better system for the kids. It is my utmost effort not to harm my children. I want to protect them. I don’t want to regret anything. And try not to regret that we live in Fukushima.” She concludes: “Thirty years from now, I would like to know that what I did was good, that I paid attention, that my judgement today blossoms in the future.”

The sun shines through the thin curtains in her living room. She only opens the windows when there is hardly any wind. Today, she still needs to Hoover the whole house, something she started doing everyday since the evacuation.

Mrs. Sugano knows that the safety she longs for doesn’t exist anymore, but she tries to reconstruct it daily. For her children.



Minako Sugano, a mother of three children, and a former kindergarten teacher in Date City, checks the internet on her iPad.



Toys on a shelf at Minako’s house in Date City.