

MRS. TATSUKO OKAWARA



Date of birth:
August 22, 1954

Currently living in:
Tamura City, Fukushima
prefecture

Shop in:
Miharu town, 40km south
of Fukushima City Central

Profession: organic farmer,
café owner and puppeteer

Married, two sons (22,
15), three daughters (24,
twins 20)

Tatsuko Okawara pulls the white cloth off a table in her café, throws a black one on instead, decorates it with miniature logs of cotton and Velcro, and attaches brown mushrooms to them. She then takes two puppets out of a box. Both have black hair and are almost half a metre tall. Mrs. Okawara puts them over her arms, steps back, lifts the puppets over the new stage, closes her eyes and starts singing. Or rather, the puppet with the light blue jumper and the orange apron starts singing. It is Hanako's song about how beautiful life is.

It is the happy beginning of the story of Taro and Hanako. Mrs. Okawara is a puppeteer.

She is worried that people forget: Forget what happened at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plants almost three years ago; forget that the disaster continues. "Forgetting things means there is a chance that it can be repeated. That is my message. That is the theory of history. People who forget what the war is like always trigger the war. And then the disaster starts to become the problem of only a few people. While others simply continue living their lives as before the disaster." She is calm: "Forgetting things is very scary. But the suffering goes on."

Like the suffering of her friends who have been shiitake mushroom farmers for 35 years. "Because of Fukushima, they had to throw away four tons of shiitake mushrooms. Instead, they are left with 60,000 mushroom logs designated as nuclear waste. Their friends were so worried that they may commit suicide." She starts crying quietly and looks at a space, which is not there anymore. "That's why I created the puppet story. The nuclear disaster also means this story. My show is not completed, but I am praying to continue it and deliver the message."

She plays the shiitake mushroom story once a month for adults only. "I also want to develop a show for children. How the nuclear disaster started. And develop little booklets to tell the story. But there are many more stories. I want to collect them carefully."

The shop and café are another response to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. Mr. and Mrs. Okawara have been organic farmers for the last 30 years. “We used no pesticides or other chemicals. And then the radiation fell onto our vegetable field. Radioactive caesium meant we lost customers.”

And nearly lost their livelihood. The family evacuated to Koriyama right after the disaster. But her husband said: “I cannot leave the chicken and the cows.” The three children who live with them said: “We don’t want to leave our friends and the house.” They returned. She and her husband turned over ten to twenty centimetres of the topsoil and then chose to grow vegetables that don’t go too deep, like the short carrots they grow now. Vegetables less prone to absorbing radiation. They decided to continue being farmers.

She looks determined: “Too many awful things happened to keep quiet. It’s not easy to run a business, but we try.” They opened the shop and café in 2013. It is called *Esperi*, Esperanto for “to have hope”. For her, it means to create a country without nuclear energy. As a farmer and parent, living in this society, she wants to do it one by one, connect with customers and unite people. She thinks people should vote anti-nuclear and, through their consumption behaviour, make companies do the right thing.

Conscious consumption is an aim of their shop. It has three concepts: “First, to disclose the level of radioactive caesium and how the product was made. Second, it is a place to unite people: Japan with the rest of the world, the city with the countryside. The third aim is to support domestic fair-trade, since agricultural self-sufficiency is not an easy situation. Specifically for young generation farmers who decide to be farmers.” Like their older son who came back after the disaster to support them and to be a farmer. “He did it out of solidarity with us. If our son hadn’t come back, I doubt we would be where we are today. This disaster split families apart, destroyed relationships. We don’t want to forget that and that’s why we don’t just call ourselves lucky.”

Ms Okawara has now switched puppets. Taro and Hanako are old now. They both have white hair. It is decades after the nuclear power plants disaster. They discuss that everything is gone – the birds and the fish – that everything is destroyed. Farmers and fishermen are suffering. Hanako has one question though:

“Some day could we have a sky without radiation?” She does not receive an answer, like many victims of the disaster.



The Okawaras at their organic and fair trade shop Esperi in Miharu Town, Fukushima prefecture. They sell organic food that local farmers have produced.



Tatsuko Okawara plays a puppet show at her shop. The story is about a couple affected by a nuclear disaster. She created the tale based on her friends’ true experiences, so that their story is not forgotten.