



Karly Hilgers with two of her host family's children in Koriyama, Japan. The Grande Prairie Rotary exchange student has been in Japan since August, but will return home Wednesday in the wake of the devastating earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan last week.

Exchange student on her way home

By **REMO ZACCAGNA**, Herald-Tribune staff

Karly Hilgers was alone when the big one hit.

The first thing she could think of was to flee to safety.

An exchange student in Japan since August, Karly became used to feeling earthquakes regularly, but quickly realized this one was different, way different.

"I was on the computer when it started shaking. For the first five or so seconds I thought it was a regular small (earthquake), but then it really started shaking," the 17-year-old Grande Prairian told the Herald-Tribune via email.

"I ran to the rice field outside my house since it's the first open place I thought of. I crouched down because I couldn't keep standing very easily.

"I couldn't believe it was happening. All around me telephone poles were waving back and forth and our little house looked like it was going to fall. It was like a nightmare.

"We spent most of that night sitting in our neighbour's car. Eventually we went back to our own house, but needless to say nobody got any sleep."

Hilgers is spending a year in Koriyama, a city in the Fukushima Prefecture of northeastern Japan, as part of a Rotary Youth exchange program.

She was living approximately 80 kilometres from Sendai, the epicentre of Friday's massive killer earthquake and tsunami.

Karly said she is no longer able to recognize Koriyama, a city she has grown to love since arriving in August.

But it could have been worse.

"Luckily (I live) about an hour away from the coastline," she said. "Some of the older buildings in my city collapsed. The city is a mess. A multi-level parking lot collapsed in the middle.

"My house is fine, though everything that used to be on the tables or desks was thrown to the floor."

The situation is so unpredictable that Kevin Hilgers, Karly's father and a member of the Rotary Club of Grande Prairie, said she and another Rotary district exchange student from Athabasca will be coming home this week.

Rotary International booked Karly on a Wednesday-evening flight out of Tokyo, although how she will get there from Koriyama is unknown.

"We still have to get her to Tokyo; we'll find out later today, I hope," Hilgers said. "I don't know if the trains are running or not. Sometimes we see things that say they are, and sometimes we see things that say they aren't, so we don't know."

He said while he's happy his daughter is coming home, he has "mixed feelings" about her leaving her life in Japan behind.

"It's hard on me and my family because we know that she's not just dropping and leaving a vacation," he said. "She's leaving a family and schoolmates and her home and that's where her heart is right now.

"She's been there since August, so that's her life right now."

Karly expressed the same mixed feelings.

"I love Japan and I love being an exchange student here. But I don't think that life is going to go back to normal any time soon. Everyone seems confused about what is happening at the nuclear power plant," she said.

"It's hard to feel safe when there are aftershocks so often. At the moment, being with my family (in Grande Prairie) sounds so good."

Tom Winterford spent 15 years in Japan teaching English, before moving back to Grande Prairie a year ago with his wife, Megumi, and their two young children.

He said he had never been to Sendai, nor does he know anyone from that area.

"A year before I left Japan, this would have been two years ago, I was offered a job up in Sendai in one of the private high schools there," he said.

"I'm glad I didn't take it and stay there, but that's about as close to Sendai as I came."

His wife, however, who was born on the southernmost island of Japan before relocating to Hiroshima, has a friend whose relatives are unaccounted for.

"A friend has relatives in the Miyagi Prefecture and they haven't been able to reach them, so they don't know if their relatives are OK or not," Megumi said.

"All they can do is just wait to hear from them, because there's no power or telephone or anything and they can't do anything."

The images of the death and destruction that have befallen her country are almost too much for her to comprehend.

"I'm just speechless. (Sendai) could be any little city or town in Japan. I don't know what to say, but most of the cities in Japan look like Sendai.

"And those kind of houses they build in wood and once the tsunami comes they get thrown around and when the wave goes away they just crash to the ground. That's why they're broken in pieces."

Winterford said the Japanese are used to constant tremors and had been waiting for what people on the North American West Coast call "The Big One."

"The last two years, I seem to remember, it was constantly mentioned that the really big one is coming and we're just waiting," he said.

"But it wasn't in the place where they thought it would be. It was supposed to be a little bit south of the Toki region and this (Sendai) is north of there."

Tremors felt in peace

Dr. Dave Eaton, a University of Calgary professor and head of the geosciences department, said the quake is a "mirror image" of what West Coasters can expect in the future.

"The actual size and style of the earthquake in Japan was very similar to what is expected in the region stretching from southern Vancouver Island to northern California," he said.

"We anticipate that at some point in the future, it could be in hundreds of years or it could be next year, we don't know, a similar type of earthquake will occur ... and we could also expect a similar type of tsunami."

Eaton headed a student project in 2009 to install seismic monitoring devices at several locations across Alberta.

They include one at Saskatoon Mountain Kennels, about 25 kilometres west of Grande Prairie, as well as in the North Peace communities of High Level and Manning, and four other locations elsewhere in Alberta.

Twelve minutes after the Japanese quake hit, all stations detected it, especially those in the Peace Country.

"In Alberta the ground shaking lasted for over an hour. It would have been imperceptible to people, but the seismograph instruments are quite capable of detecting it," he explained.

"Part of the reason that people wouldn't have noticed it is because it is so low frequency, so the vibrations would have been in sort of tens of seconds, maybe 20 seconds or 30 seconds to go through a full vibration, and people just simply don't notice those."