

Note: The RERF program is not a typical research program since it aims at fostering the health and welfare of the A-bomb survivors. A unique nurse's perspective on the RERF and the health of the A-bomb survivors is presented below by Amy Knowles. Questions/comments on the article can be addressed to Dr. Knowles at aknowles@utk.edu.

THE ROAD TO HIROSHIMA AND BEYOND

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My road to Hiroshima began as I was a nurse with public health and emergency preparedness experience and a doctoral student at University of Tennessee College of Nursing Homeland Security Program. My studies, which included a comprehensive and all-hazards approach to disaster events from a global perspective, provided the opportunity to further my interest in disaster nursing. Through collaborations with the University, my mentor Dr. Susan Speraw, and the Department of Energy, I became aware of the Radiation Effects Research Foundation (RERF) in Japan, and its work with survivors of the atomic bomb event. I was honored as a recipient of a scholarship to attend training at RERF in Hiroshima in the fall of 2008.

Prior to my trip, I feverishly spent six months in preparation. I scoured the literature for background information on the bombing events in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as the basics of radiation science and long-term effects. I refreshed my understanding with the knowledge and resources I had gained from a recent training course at the Radiation Emergency Assistance Center/Training Site (REAC/TS). I spoke with Dr. Speraw who had visited RERF previously and with dosimetry expert Dr. George Kerr. I left for Hiroshima in August 2008 feeling as prepared as possible for the journey.

What I encountered at RERF amazed me, surpassed anything I could have planned for, and far exceeded any expectations I had. My liaison, Dr. Kazuo Neriishi, worked tirelessly to ensure I had a well-rounded representation of the research efforts of RERF. I attended lectures from world-renowned radiation science experts and greatly expanded my knowledge base. The opportunity to speak with the nursing supervisor Ms. Kuwamoto provided a greater understanding of the realm of nursing practice with the *hibakusha*, or "explosion-affected persons".

Beyond the knowledge of radiation research that I gained, an unexpected outcome of the journey was obtained; experiential knowledge of an amazing group of people. During my trip to RERF, I experienced the dedication and spirit of the Japanese people. For example, the lengths that Dr. Neriishi went through to ensure a good experience for me at RERF was impressive. Additionally, I was able to meet Ms. Junko Houta who took me under her wing, displaying the finest Japanese hospitality. And because of my interest in the survivors, I was able interview one of the *hibakusha* who came into clinic for a biennial examination at RERF. The story she told of her trauma and adversity left me speechless; and instilled a thirst to learn more about the experiences of surviving an atomic bomb, and apply lessons gained from surviving catastrophic disaster in the past to public health threats in the

present. The experiences and perspectives gained through my time at RERF led directly to my doctoral dissertation at the University of Tennessee.

My doctoral research was a qualitative descriptive study of the experience of surviving an atomic bomb event. With the assistance of Dr Neriishi, I was introduced to Ms. Geri Handa, with the Friends of *Hibakusha* in San Francisco, California. She was instrumental in assisting me with access to the survivors who were currently residing in the United States. Ultimately, I had the opportunity to interview eight exceptional *hibakusha* as a part of my dissertation work. With a research design combining oral history and ethnography, the qualitative study provided a window into the human experience of survival; the findings enrich our current knowledge of disaster response and expand beyond the medical model into a more holistic view of health. The theoretical framework for the research was Leininger's Culture Care Diversity and Universality theory; findings were framed within the context of kinship and social, language, worldview, educational, religious and philosophical, cultural values and lifeways, and political factors. Data analysis revealed core themes of trauma, overcoming adversity, resilience, forgiveness, and peace activism. Findings gained from this research expand the knowledge base about disaster management and offers recommendations for future response efforts.



Geri Handa and Amy Knowles, San Francisco, CA, 2009
photograph by Takashi Tanemori

Not only was my experience with RERF both enlightening and amazing, and the *hibakusha*'s stories riveting, but their openness and willingness to divulge intimate details of their horrific experience was stirring. Their renewed sense of spirit was refreshing. I am deeply grateful for the contributions that DOE and RERF made to assist me in the successful completion of my doctoral work; allowing a greater understanding of the human experience following catastrophic disaster events.