

Quake danger is his calling

Anne Gonzalez, Sacramento Bee, 6-12-11

H. Kit Miyamoto has always been willing to pick up his bags and go.

Growing up in Tokyo, he dreamed of playing football for the Dallas Cowboys. So when he graduated from high school in 1981, he announced to his parents that he was moving to the United States.

He wound up at Butte College, playing on the football team. But first he spent several months in La Harpe, Kansas, population 500, a spot he says he chose by pointing at the middle of a map of the United States.

"I was staying with a family and trying to learn English and the American way of life," said Miyamoto, now 48. "I think I was the only Japanese person in the entire state of Kansas. People kept asking me what tribe I was from."

A knee injury ended Miyamoto's football dream, but the career that followed has nonetheless been larger than life. As head of Miyamoto International, a structural engineering firm based in West Sacramento, Miyamoto travels to disaster hot spots around the world, advising governments and businesses on beefing up their buildings to withstand earthquakes, and helping restore cities leveled by acts of God.

"My background really helps," he said. "I'm a cultural anthropologist before an engineer. Anthropologists embed themselves into tribes, they learn the language and food. This helps me when I'm figuring out solutions. I need to know how a building works in its context, or the solution won't work."

His firm's work can be found in residential and business districts, airports, schools, hospitals, civic hubs and energy plants throughout the world. With offices in Los Angeles, Orange County, San Francisco, San Diego, Portland/Vancouver, Haiti, Milan, Istanbul and Tokyo, Miyamoto International Inc. has completed more than 10,000 projects, and is probably most visible for disaster recovery and rehabilitation.

After a disaster, Miyamoto, president and chief executive officer of the firm, works with national governments, private sector corporations, nonprofit groups and international organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Quick response

Miyamoto's 100 employees have responded to nearly 100 earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and tsunamis worldwide.

They are sometimes among the first responders after a disaster has struck, on the ground for emotional rescues of survivors and the recovery of bodies. They often have to enter unsafe or unstable neighborhoods and structures.

"I've walked through streets that have bodies all over the place," he said. "There are usually dangerous aftershocks. Sometimes, it's just us and soldiers and rescuers."

Among other projects, Miyamoto International has been hired by the Haitian government to assess structural damage from the 7.0-magnitude earthquake in January 2010, including to the National Palace of the Republic of

Haiti.

Dan O'Neil, senior director for Caribbean programs for the Pan American Development Foundation, said he drove Miyamoto into damaged Haitian neighborhoods one week after the deadly earthquake. O'Neil said Miyamoto entered buildings to survey damage, rescued equipment that could be salvaged, and assessed which parts of the airport could be used and which had to be abandoned.

In a particularly dramatic scene, Miyamoto was called on to save the country's national budget, finance and tax records from the palace.

The records were on computers in the basement of the palace, and there were no backups.

"Kit put on his white hard hat, snapped on his headlight, led a team of three to four into the Ministry of Finance, and brought out the servers, all with CNN filming," O'Neil recalled. "He also went into the palace with the president's daughter to retrieve important files. There were still bodies in the building, this was very fresh. He did action hero-type stuff."

O'Neil's nonprofit also worked with Miyamoto in training more than 270 engineers and construction professionals to inspect and tag homes for repair or demolition. With \$5 million in funding from the World Bank, more than 389,000 homes were inspected in eight months, with the door-to-door assessments logged onto GPS systems. O'Neil called it the largest damage assessment ever after a disaster.

Miyamoto said half of Port-au-Prince was destroyed, and death toll estimates were as high as 300,000, or one in 10 of the region's residents.

"Yet, the Haitian people inspire me every day," Miyamoto said. "They are an amazingly energized, polite, hopeful and resourceful people."

He said Haitian residents recognize him on the street and turn out to greet him and hug him. He finds his work most rewarding when he sees families moving back into their homes.

Fears for California

Miyamoto happened to be in Tokyo during the recent earthquake and tsunami, presenting at a conference and vacationing with his wife and two young children. While he and his family made it safely out of the country, he saw not only damage from the quake, but the shutdown of transportation systems and utilities that can cripple cities and neighborhoods.

He fears that California could suffer a similar fate if older buildings aren't brought up to modern seismic code, and if the state doesn't develop a comprehensive tsunami warning system.

"What we have is unbelievably fragile," he said. "Civilization can be gone like that, in a matter of moments."

In addition to its work overseas, Miyamoto International has installed high-performance seismic engineering designs in many local projects, including the former Money Store ziggurat, the Citizen Hotel, Mikuni's downtown restaurant, and classrooms at California State University, Sacramento.

One of the most famous of his retrofits is the flying saucer-shaped Theme Building at Los Angeles International Airport. The \$10 million project will help the 50-year-old landmark withstand a 7.0-magnitude quake.

While he would not release specific revenue numbers, Miyamoto said his sales grew 25 percent last year alone.

"We're one of the most profitable in the industry, because we're not just engineers, we try to understand the deeper issues," Miyamoto said. "We don't put profits first. Put the purpose first, and the profits will flow."