

# Sharing the joy of mobility

## The Volunteers Group to Send Wheelchairs to Overseas Children

In 2004, at the age of 48, Hirokazu Morita was diagnosed with cancer and given one year to live. With the time he had left, he wanted to do something good for the world.

**One of his** children uses a wheelchair, and he felt strongly that it was a waste to throw functional, clean wheelchairs away simply because — after between three and five years — their users outgrow them. He wanted more children to know the joy of being able to move around, so he came up with the idea of delivering used wheelchairs to children in developing countries whose families can't afford to buy them. He told some of his friends what he wanted to do and, with their support, sent 16 wheelchairs to Malaysia. This was the beginning of the NGO The Volunteers Group to Send Wheelchairs to Overseas Children.

Seventeen years later, having survived cancer, Morita, the president of our organisation, continues to support children in countries around the world.

As of the end of July, we have delivered a total of 8,722 wheelchairs overseas. We have sent wheelchairs to children in 24 countries, including nations in Asia, such as Malaysia and Vietnam; in Africa, such as Ethiopia and Tanzania; and in Latin America, such as Paraguay and Honduras.

Our main activities are collecting wheelchairs, then refurbishing, packing, and shipping them. Representatives from our

organisation also attend donation ceremonies overseas and meet children and our partners.

We regularly ask special schools in the Kanto region to provide us with wheelchairs that are no longer being used. We arrange for trucks to collect these wheelchairs and we store them in our warehouse.

Once a month, between 30 and 50 volunteers gather to refurbish the wheelchairs we have collected. Those who volunteer are demographically diverse, including high school students, university students, Vietnamese and Ethiopian residents of Japan, and company employees. Volunteer work involves cleaning, repairing, and packing wheelchairs. Each time we have refurbished 90 or 180 wheelchairs, we send them to our overseas partners in containers.

We don't provide direct support to disabled children. Our partners in other countries are the ones who do that. After the wheelchairs are adjusted to fit each child, our partners deliver them.

Finding an overseas partner is a very important but challenging task. A number of those we work with were found through personal connections of some of our directors or through recommendations from welfare associations abroad. We require that our overseas partners are capable

of choosing a wheelchair that fits each child, repairing wheelchairs when they break, and arranging for each wheelchair to be passed on to another child after its user has outgrown it.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, our activities — apart from collecting wheelchairs from special schools — have been almost completely suspended. This year, we will only be sending around 200 wheelchairs overseas, compared with the more than 700 we shipped in 2019. We look forward to the time when we will be able to fully resume our activities.

In February, we received the Japan Foundation Prize for Global Citizenship. It was a great honour to receive this award, and a good opportunity for many more people to find out about our activities. In addition to the prize of ¥2 million — which is welcome support for an NGO such as ours that relies on donations for all of our financial resources — we gained some new supporters who made donations. We are grateful to the many individuals and companies that make annual donations.

Many children around the world need wheelchairs. We want to get as many as possible moving. ●



Hirokazu Morita with a wheelchair recipient in Dessie, Ethiopia, February 2016

Find out more about our activities at [kaigaikurumaisu.org/en](http://kaigaikurumaisu.org/en)

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