

Awesome AIQ Newspaper



Ms. Shoji talking about AIQ, the Aizu cotton teddy bear

New possibilities using Aizu cotton

On July 31, our members interviewed the AIQ Group about their handicrafts, made with Aizu cotton. The group comprises of women who had to evacuate to Aizu after the 2011 accident at Tokyo Electric Power Company Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power station. The AIQ Group was started in 2012

by Ms. Yoko Shoji (71), the representative of the group, after a chance encounter with friends at their refuge. Based on their desire to do something that gave meaning to their lives while they are away from their hometown the members started the group from scratch. Ms. Shoji said that, for the members,

the group's activities are their way of expressing their gratitude to the Aizu community, who helped them start the group by providing them with sewing machines, thread and other material.

The group makes more than 10 different types of handicrafts, including the teddy bear "AIQ" and drawstring purse.

Their products can be purchased at the Inawashiro roadside station or through the Internet. The items are also available as exclusive products sold through vending machines at Tokyo's Haneda Airport.

Teddy bears and straps



The charming shoe-button-eye AIQ and its fashionable bandana. Its bands of color are reminiscent of the cherry blossoms of Okuma Town.

The group's name "AIQ" (a combination of the kanji for "Aizu" and "sky") in addition to expressing members' gratitude to Aizu, was chosen to invoke the interconnectedness of the skies, not only over Aizu and their beloved hometown Okuma Town but also the rest of the world. It also reminds people of the interconnectedness of the present and the future, they said.

"AIQ" is a teddy bear made using Aizu cotton. Each bear is accented with a bandana around its neck. The bears' distinguishing feature is their shoe-button eyes and absence of a mouth. According to Ms. Shoji, "The absence of a mouth leaves more room for imagination, making the bear more relatable to the owner." The teddy bear's design is inspired by the Okuma Town mascots Oochan and Kuchan.

Till now, great care goes into making each bear.

Gratitude to Aizu



Aizu cotton comes in various colors, for which it is famous. The teddy bears are made using different combinations of colors and patterns, giving each bear a unique personality. During our interview, we listened eagerly and took notes while the interviewees talked about their work.



Hands-on experience making cotton-wrapped buttons. The process looked easy at first but was actually rather difficult.



Completed cotton-wrapped button strap

We made cotton-wrapped button straps!

The cotton-wrapped button strap is the group's original product. The straps are defined by their gorgeous color combinations, highlighting the excellent qualities of Aizu cotton.

During our hands-on experience, we had difficulty selecting the right color combinations from among the large variety of Aizu cotton fabrics available. The straps are made by bonding two cotton-wrapped buttons using glue with the strap holder inserted between them. Although the work looked easy at first, it was much harder than we imagined. We were really happy to see the successfully completed product.

Creating one's own future

"You can do anything you set your mind to," was Ms. Shoji's advice to us – the younger generation with a long future ahead. "You can't expect help until you make a move." "Okuma is blessed with riches of the sea and plentiful fruits," said Ms. Shoji. "It is said that people living by the sea tend to be rough by nature, but people in Okuma are all kind and good-natured. There are more memories of Okuma than I can recount. I would love to return if I could. But I don't want to spend my life passively, just as a disaster victim." It was this positive mindset that inspired others around her to take action. The members' longing for their hometown is also apparent in their work, such as the design inspired by Okuma Town's cherry blossoms. Ms. Shoji and her team are determined to continue making their Aizu cotton handicrafts, even after their return to Okuma Town someday.

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