

# What happens when things go wrong — and you're a world away from home?

OSU works tirelessly to help study abroad students in turmoil

**Adam King** onCampus staff |

Earthquakes in Japan are a monthly occurrence, just a part of living on the island nation. But the one that hit on March 11 kept going after the usual 15 to 20 seconds, and that's when Kaytlin Error, one of 14 Ohio State students on study abroad in Japan, began to fear for her life.

In her 11th-floor apartment in Tokyo, Error's entire world swayed along with her building.

"Things were falling off my shelf, furniture was bouncing around and a crane was bouncing around outside. The building was swaying so much that I thought it was going to collapse," said Error, who had been in Japan seven months. "I was extremely scared."

Error wasn't the only one worried about her well-being. As soon as word reached the US about the disaster, Study Abroad Director Grace Johnson assembled her crisis team to ensure the students' safety.

This wasn't the first crisis the Office of International Affairs, which oversees study abroad, has had to confront. Last summer a group of 20 students had to be moved out of Moscow by train to St. Petersburg during massive forest fires that closed the airports. And just recently a graduate student decided to remain in Egypt during the protests that forced President Hosni Mubarak out of power.

The first step OIA takes is to

contact each student, whether directly, through their family or through the international host schools. The day the tsunami hit Japan, Johnson was able to reach 10 of the students, and by the following day all 14 were found to be safe. None had been near the epicenter or the tsunami destruction.

With cell phone and Internet usage spotty, Error still managed to call her parents using Skype on her friend's iPhone. Her parents then made sure OSU knew she was OK.

Graduate student KT Bender was in a grocery store in Yokohama with friends when the earthquake hit. They continued shopping when the tremors first started, but they soon realized this was no normal quake. Bender had an e-mail waiting from OSU when she returned to her apartment hours later. She had been forced to walk home instead of taking an eight-minute train ride because train service was down. She got an e-mail out to let OSU know she was safe.

"OSU was very communicative as to what was going on from a university perspective," Bender said. "They informed us of the travel advisory and warnings and encouraged us to leave Japan, giving us the contact info for a travel agent — even saying they might be able to compensate us for the ticket."

The Study Abroad unit regularly receives all US Department of State communications, and on March 11

the department issued a travel alert for Japan. Three days later when damaged nuclear reactors became a cause for concern, the department issued its highest alert, a travel warning, which recommends citizens avoid traveling to the country and those already there to leave.

The University of California system recalled all its students from Japan. But OSU allowed its students to make their own decisions.

"There was a range of reactions," Johnson said. "There was one student who was in Hokkaido in the extreme north out of harm's way who right away said, 'I'm going to stay.' Another student in the south said his host institution said things were fine and he was going to stay. And some students took us up on the offer and have come home."

"With the reactors, the situation was not improving and business was not as usual in Japan. In light of recent events and the uncertainty of radiation, we encouraged students to return."

Nine students in all returned to the US and five remained. Error and Bender were among those who came back, but Bender changed her mind and decided to fly back to Japan, which she did March 29.

"I'm going back because, at the very least, I need to go back to take care of my apartment," Bender wrote in an e-mail from the Detroit airport as she waited for her flight.

"I'm hoping things will settle down soon. If Yokohama doesn't look like a good place to be, I'll go to my grandparents' house in rural Aichi to continue my studies. I'm at a point now where it's important for me to have access to Japanese bookstores and libraries to do my work, so it will be best if I'm able to stay in Japan."

All OSU students were advanced-language learners through the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, which meant their experiences were much more embedded than, say, that of a faculty adviser leading a visiting student group.

A traveling group would have been brought home for sure, Johnson said, but the students' unique situation warranted a voluntary approach. Having a Study Abroad Health and Safety Committee at OSU ensures decisions aren't made in a vacuum, she added. This group is the university-wide committee which provides oversight to student health and safety and study abroad risk management.

For those students who chose to come back, Study Abroad worked to reintegrate them into OSU life. Johnson worked with Student Life, University Security Services and East Asian Languages and Literatures to get them housing and a class schedule.

"I was very stressed out — how am I going to just jump back into American university life?" said Error, who is continuing her undergraduate studies and plans to graduate in winter quarter before returning to live and work in Japan.

"The OIA laid out a map for me: Here's how you're going to schedule classes; this who you contact if you have issues with classes. They laid it out for me and I don't feel stressed anymore. It's fantastic and they've gone above and beyond."



Kaytlin Error, an OSU student on study abroad in Japan, experienced the March '10 earthquake.

## A team effort

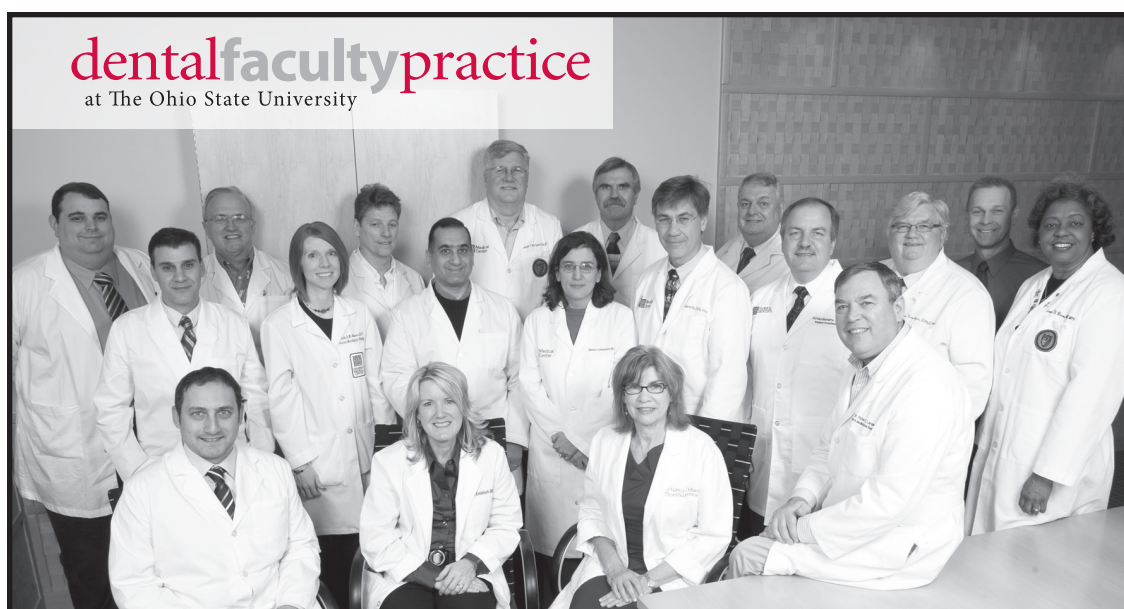
The Study Abroad Health and Safety Committee is there to provide counsel to OIA to help students when calamity strikes in another country, such as accidents, illnesses, protests, political turmoil and natural disasters.

On the committee are Wayne Carlson, vice provost for Undergraduate Education; Jan Neiger, Legal Affairs; Grace Johnson, director of Study Abroad; Dieter Wanner, associate provost for Global Strategies and International Affairs; William Brustein, vice provost for Global Strategies and International Affairs; James Jacobs, director of the Wilce Student Health Center; Herb Asher, counselor to the president; and Evan Davis, student representative.

"Each emergency is different in terms of what the circumstances are, what the Department of State is saying and the risks," Johnson said. "We're always looking at those different concerns."

Even when students book study abroad trips for OSU credit through a third-party provider, the committee works to help them. Just recently students in Christchurch, New Zealand, were relocated in case there were any aftershocks after that city's devastating earthquake.

The OIA also helps international students at OSU whose home countries experience turmoil. OSU helped 60 students from Japan get in touch with their families and stay abreast of the latest information after the earthquake.



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