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Widow's film delves into impact of Agent Orange

By KEIJI HIRANO
Kyodo News

When her American husband, Greg Davis, succumbed to liver cancer in May 2003 at the age of 54, Masako Sakata was seized with suspicion his death was caused by Agent Orange, which he had been exposed to in Vietnam during his three years of military service through 1970.

News photo

On record: Masako Sakata holds up a copy of her book about her late husband, photojournalist Greg Davis, and the story behind the shooting of her first documentary film, "Agent Orange — A Personal Requiem," at her Tokyo home this month. KYODO PHOTO

Five months later, Sakata was in Maine to attend a two-week videography course, with the secret aim of shooting a documentary film on the toxic chemical.

"I wanted to examine if his fatal disease was really connected with Agent Orange, or, in other words, I needed to do something to get over the sorrow caused by Greg's death," said Sakata, now 60.

As an agent linking photographers around the world mainly with Japanese publishers, she knew almost nothing about video shooting at that time.

Sakata and Davis met in 1970 in Kyoto, where she was attending Kyoto University and he was studying photography following his military service.

He eventually pursued a career in photojournalism, basing himself in Japan so he could cover wide parts of Asia, including Afghanistan, Cambodia, Myanmar, North Korea and Vietnam.

After learning the basics of video shooting and conducting further research, she visited Vietnam with a compact camera in July 2004 to interview and film those who were exposed to Agent Orange, and their physically and intellectually disabled or deformed children.

"Rather than feeling sorry for them, I was really impressed that they lead their lives very hard despite their handicaps, and I was profoundly moved by my encounters with them," Sakata said.

A friend of the couple who also happened to be a photojournalist helped her shoot there.

"While I wasn't sure if such efforts would lead to certain achievement, I just wanted to focus on the forgotten Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange," Sakata said.

The repeated visits to Vietnam, additional interviews with medical experts and Vietnam veterans, and late-night editing sessions eventually produced fruit as her first documentary film, "Agent Orange — A Personal Requiem," in spring 2007.

The film shows how the toxic chemical erodes the human body from generation to generation, and how the Vietnamese have struggled, both in desperation and with affection, to support the victims.

A film production company in Tokyo happened to see the documentary, leading to its screening at theaters in Tokyo and other places in 2008.

The film was also screened at international film festivals in Havana and Paris, as well as on a nonprofit basis at various places at home, including schools.

"I was glad when school kids told me they were impressed with how Vietnamese families flood the handicapped children with affection, although they had initially wanted to avert their eyes from the distressful situations," Sakata said.

"Greg is dead, but I believe from their remarks that his will to oppose wars and to cast critical eyes on events still survives."

By meeting the Agent Orange victims in Vietnam, she became more convinced that Davis was affected by the chemical, partly because he had similar symptoms, aside from the cancer, she said.

Sakata is scheduled to visit New York City in early January to show her work at a historians' conference.

"I think the historical assessment of the Vietnam War is still halfway in the United States, and I hope the screening in New York will be an opportunity for the historians to decently review the overall shape of the war," she said.

The film also allowed her to study journalism as a visiting scholar at the University of California at Berkeley for one year through last spring, and to recently publish a book that depicts her life with Davis and his activities as a photojournalist as well as the shooting process for the film.

Commenting on the film, Akihiro Nonaka, a well-known video journalist, said, "I can feel her strong will to report something from the movie.

"While it's true that a compact camera, which is inexpensive and user-friendly, enabled Ms. Sakata to shoot it by herself, her enthusiasm created the powerful message beyond her shooting technique and skills," said Nonaka, who is also a professor in the graduate school at Rikkyo University.

Having embarked on a new career as a film director, Sakata is now planning to create a sequel, again focusing on the damage caused by Agent Orange.

"People will watch my film if I can create an appealing work," she said.