

Living My When-I-Grow-Up Dream

Lisa Mommsen attended Soka University of America's first graduate program, 1994–95. Currently living in Japan, she shares her experience about becoming a teacher of English as a second language.

As a kid from Nebraska who grew up in the SGI-USA, I remember hearing for the first time about Soka University in far-off Japan and dreaming to be part of the Soka educational system. However, like many children, I grew up and that when-I-grow-up dream was buried beneath the occurrences of everyday life.

When I entered the University of Nebraska at Omaha in 1991, I decided to study international business. I enjoyed the international half of my major, but the business half was not as satisfying. I was determined to stick with it, however, because I wanted to be a businesswoman!

It was not until my junior year that a profession in education seemed attractive. The instructor of my Japanese language course, Yoshimi Yamagata, impressed me very much with her concern and dedication to all of the students in the class.

At that time, she was teaching Japanese to English speakers and English to Japanese exchange students. We would sometimes attend one another's classes so that we could practice speaking and exchange cultural information.

Once she even let me plan and conduct a lesson in her English class. From this experience I realized the rewards of teaching. Not only was I helping students learn a language, but I was also learning from the students. At that point I felt a greater attraction to education than to business. However, I had no intention of changing my major — after all, I had less than a year before graduating.

As my graduation drew closer, I prepared to enter the job market. Around this same time, my joint territory chief was visiting Nebraska Headquarters from Chicago. He informed me that Tomoko Takahashi, dean of the Graduate School at Soka University of America, was going to be in Chicago to talk about the master's program in second and foreign language education with a concentration in TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages). I had seen a copy of the SUA brochure at the community center, but I never thought I could apply or that this was my chance to get into the education field and receive a Soka education at the same time.

I did not want to burden my parents any longer for financial support, but they encouraged me to listen to Dr. Takahashi. My mother even accompanied me on the overnight drive to Chicago. At the meeting, I remember feeling intimidated by the other attendees because many were in the education field, many could speak foreign languages, and everyone seemed so well versed. I, on the other hand, had none of these skills, plus I still had not graduated from college. After listening to Dr. Takahashi, however, I knew I had to apply to the program, no matter what insecurities I felt. Otherwise, I would always wonder about the chance I had given up.

When I received the acceptance letter, I was shocked. But I was ecstatic to actually be doing something that I knew would have a tremendous impact on my life.

The program courses opened my eyes to the impact that language and language education have on society on a global scale. The classes were intensive and extensive. I studied everything from language theory to constructing a valid language test. I believe I gained the ability to think, to be objective and to question, all of which I used in my final

Title: Living My When I Grow Up Dream

Subject: World Tribune 06/06/97 n.3142 p.4 WT970606p04

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Keywords: Career Dream Experiences Grow Practice Profiles Teachers

thesis project.

My experience at SUA taught me not only about language and education but also about humanism and friendship. In a message for the Graduate School opening, the founder of SUA, Daisaku Ikeda, described Tsunesaburo Makiguchi's three stages of human development: dependent, self-reliant and contributive modes of living. Mr. Ikeda said:

A dependent life is one of reliance on the authority and capabilities of others, in which one makes little or no effort to think or act for oneself. It is, in other words, a condition of spiritual laziness. A person who lives in a self-reliant manner may have a clearly defined sense of self and creed, but is prey to alienation and self-aggrandizement. A person who lives a contributive life neither relies on external authority nor lapses into arrogance. In a contributive life, the prime motivation is to contribute to the lives of others and to the realization of their happiness. Makiguchi asserted that the human being must progress from a condition of dependence to self-reliance and finally to a contributive way of life. The mission of Soka University of America is to foster a steady stream of global citizens committed to living a contributive life.

As a student at SUA, I felt the members of the faculty and staff always had the future of the students and the university's founding principles at heart. I could feel the effort and care that my instructors and professors put into each of us in and out of the classroom. The friendships and relationships that I experienced are most dear to me. I believe it is these bonds created from respect for each unique individual that makes SUA a special place for the future of humanistic education.

I have just finished my first year teaching English in the Business Management Department at Soka Women's College in Hachioji, Japan. I have definitely used what I gained from SUA in my classes and my life. I wish that all students could enjoy the educational experience I had. That's why I will do my utmost to relay the spirit of my alma mater no matter where in the world I am.

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