

Yoriko Imasato
Editor-in-Chief, *Living Fukuoka*,
Nissei Shimbun, Inc.
Fukuoka

I departed Japan on June 6 for the Japan-US Women Leaders Dialogue study tour of the United States. This tour was planned with consideration given to the importance of face-to-face communication. The program was made possible with the help of the US-based Institute of International Education (IIE) and the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE). In the first phase of the program, six women from various parts of the United States visited Japan and met with women from around the country. Six women from Tokyo, Yokohama, Kanazawa and Fukuoka participated in the second phase of the program. Over a two-week period, we visited Los Angeles, Spokane, Chicago, and New York and were hosted in each location by the US women leaders who had visited Japan.

The Importance of Communication

In California our host was Irene, who welcomed us with a big heart and a warm hug. She is the Executive Director of Project Info Community Services (PICS), a social service organization. Since 1976, PICS has worked to eradicate alcohol and drug abuse. In order to help people overcome alcohol and drug addiction, it is essential to strengthen family bonds, and PICS has various programs to achieve this.

We visited PICS, where one of the staffmembers, Dolores, was in charge of a program to enhance family communication. She staged a skit for us depicting the relationship between a mother and her child. "Hurry! Hurry! What are you doing! Why are you so slow!" Rather than scolding children in this manner, Dolores explained it was better to praise them. Another staffmember spoke of the effectiveness of hugging children, explaining that expressing one's feelings through physical action was a better means of communicating than by words alone. Dolores explained that she presented the skits in order to make the lessons more interesting for the parents and children who come to PICS after work and school and who may otherwise fall asleep. These skits are aimed at Latinos and are conducted in Spanish for first generation immigrants, and in English for their children who learn English at school and from friends. The program was established to cope with the barriers that arise between the two languages.

The Strength of Lynn Appel

What does one do when she becomes an alcoholic? We visited a shelter for female alcoholics called Foley House. The appearance of the shelter was a pleasant surprise—the lawn, the little fountain, the antique sofa with the floral pattern, the white table cloth. The tasteful decor made us feel as if we had been invited into the home of a family. We were told that this was the only shelter in California where residents could bring their children. They showed us one of the rooms, which was full of dolls and toys. The nail polish bottles lined up on the television drew my eye. Seeing this, I realized that Foley House was different from similar facilities in Japan. Beautiful and enjoyable items were not taken away from the women at Foley House. The Executive Director of the shelter, Lynne Appel, explained to us that making people feel as if they were part of the family was what made the program effective. By no means would the walls and floors be painted white.

Lynne was tall and slim and looked young. Though she smiled when she talked, we could sense from listening to her that she was a very strong woman. I asked her whether these people would not return to their former environment soon after leaving the shelter. She answered that she had bought 25 houses near the shelter, using housing loans from the California state government. From her reply I saw her great strength and her determination to do whatever it takes. After leaving the shelter, if the women were able to live in nearby houses for a year with their children, then they would truly be on the road to independence.

The Role of the Nonprofit Sector

The places we visited on this trip were mostly organizations in the private, nonprofit sector. When I visited Lynne Appel's project, I thought that, if the Japanese were to build a shelter, it would probably be a much larger, uninteresting, white building. As long as the government was building the facility, and as long as decisions were made solely by men, efficiency would be given priority. There would be no soft carpets, comforting pictures, or nail polish bottles on the TV, though these things are indispensable in helping to soothe the soul.

The role of women in the private, nonprofit sector is vital. Although this is true in Japan as well, the biggest difference between the United States and Japan with respect to the nonprofit sector is the scale of their respective budgets. The combined budget of US nonprofit organizations (NPOs) is some 300 billion yen. The sector employs five to seven percent of the US workforce. The scale of the US nonprofit sector is truly greater than that of Japan. This scale makes it possible for an organization to build a shelter on an acre of land and to purchase nurseries and 25 houses.

One reason why these funds are available is the tax-exempt status of some 500,000 organizations. (Donations to these organizations are tax-exempt.) It is surprising that there are only 700 equivalent organizations in Japan. I would like to see

changes in the tax laws in Japan. At the same time, greater efforts are also required from the private voluntary sector itself. I visited a number of organizations in the United States and found that their financial figures were clearly and openly presented along with a variety of pamphlets and videos which describe organizational activities. This allows donors to see how their money has been spent. I believe that, together with government and for-profit organizations, these active private voluntary organizations have become a pillar of American society.

Politics and Women

Forty Percent of State Legislators Are Women

I would like to mention here what I thought about politics in Spokane, Washington, our next stop after Los Angeles. Until very recently, the building housing the city hall in Spokane had been a department store. City Hall was moved to its current location when the old building had grown too small. The first thing I noticed at City Hall was a bright red *uchikake* (Japanese wedding garment) which had been donated by Spokane's sister city of Nishinomiya. Perhaps this relationship was the reason why so many people in Spokane seemed knowledgeable about Japan. When we stepped into the conference room, a smiling, amiable woman welcomed us with opened arms. She was the Mayor of Spokane, Sheri Barnard. State legislators, city council members, and the County Commissioner were waiting to meet us in her office. I was astonished to hear that 40 percent of Washington state legislators are women. We realized how different the situation is in Japan when we considered that the percentage of women in local government assemblies in Japan is 3.6 percent. Incidentally, Ms. Barnard is the second of two consecutive women mayors in Spokane.

To the State Assembly With Children

Lisa Brown's story as a new member of the state assembly was interesting. A professor of economics, Ms. Brown had lectured on the injustices of society. As she lectured, others began encouraging her to enter politics. She was elected to the state legislature this year. On one occasion, the assembly continued until late at night, and because she had not been able to get a babysitter, she brought her 15-month old boy to the assembly room. The male legislators complained despite the fact that the child neither cried nor caused any trouble. The incident was written up in the newspapers the next day, making Lisa the most famous state legislator in Washington. In any case, thanks to Lisa, the need for daycare has become more widely recognized.

I asked her what she thought about women becoming mayors and state legislators. She answered that because women dislike violence and war, women should be able to practice more peaceful politics, and hence should have the power to make decisions concerning education, children, living, housing, and everything. I agreed with her. I was very impressed by the means which candidates raise funds for their election campaigns. For instance, anyone who wanted to see Lisa elected

to the state assembly would send her one hundred dollars. In Japan, the candidates would send money to the voters. Of course this is illegal, but it is the exact opposite of what happens in Spokane. I think it is obvious what a difference this makes. I feel that Japanese women should try much harder. It is not enough to just complain that the political system is corrupt. Women in Japan must become more active, like the women on the other side of the Pacific, in Spokane. There they have already gained decision-making authority.

The Joy of Being Able to Start Over

I was very pleased to see Susan again in Spokane. When Susan visited Japan, she had been anxious about leaving behind her six-year-old daughter in the same way I was concerned about leaving my seven-year-old daughter. Susan's daughter, Annie, was a lovely child and soon became everyone's favorite. Her husband, Bob, raises funds for Northwest Regional Facilitators (NRF), while Susan makes sure those funds are put to good use. They appeared to be good partners both in public and private. During the briefing by NRF staff, I was surprised to learn that there are hungry children in a country as wealthy as the United States.

On our second day in Spokane, we visited the YWCA. On the second floor there was an open room filled with clothes and necessities for needy people. Though they were secondhand, the white pumps had been polished, and the clothes had been newly washed. There were clothes that could be worn for job interviews. The person in charge was pleased that recently a person had worn one of the suits and succeeded in getting a job. What impressed me most was that the door was always kept open so that borrowers would not feel embarrassed; I think this is done out of respect for their dignity as human beings.

We also joined a class held for homeless children. Although the children were very cheerful and I enjoyed being with them, by the time I had to leave, I became sad and hoped that these children would find a home to settle in as soon as possible.

This day was also the day we stayed in the homes of American families. Although I was worried about my ability to communicate, Theresa and Chris spoke to me in simple English. Theresa obtained her university degree after turning 30, which is apparently common in the United States. It seemed to have been quite difficult for her because she entered school immediately after her second child was born. The United States seems to be a very progressive society because one is able to give birth to a child and then get another start in life. I was impressed that Chris helped make dinner for us. We got along so well that I was sad when the time came to leave Spokane.

Women Should Help Other Women

Chicago was much more beautiful than I anticipated. I was surprised by the openness of the Illinois State Building. The first floor was a shopping area while the basement housed numerous restaurants. The middle of the building was open and there were no partitions on any of the floors. And that wasn't the only thing remarkable about our visit to the State Building. Christine, our guide in the building,

was only 29 years old but was already an executive in the state government. When asked how she had reached her present rank, she replied that her female boss had supported her. I have learned from numerous examples that those who have led the way should support those who are following in their footsteps—a dot becomes a line and a line becomes a surface. At City Hall we met with Mayor Richard Daley.

We visited one of our Chicago hosts, Bernie, who is the Executive Director of the Chinese American Service League (CASL). One thing I found interesting was CASL's chef training program. A vital program for Chinese immigrants, it teaches them necessary English terms and cooking skills so that they will be able to make a living. We also visited Jane Addams' Hull House. My colleague Ms. Yamaguchi reports on this in great detail.

The next day we finally visited the Art Institute of Chicago. I had been looking forward to the day even before I came to the United States because Ronne, one of our hosts, worked at the museum. As we were short of time, we were unable to see the main attraction, the Asian art exhibits, but I was completely fascinated by the paintings of van de Weigen, Botticelli, and Pablo Picasso's *Mother and Child*. I enjoyed speaking before an audience of 50 of Chicago's leaders including the President of the Art Institute and Marshall Field V, the Director.

I must add that the early morning briefing by the members of the media was also interesting. I was able to sympathize with the editor of the women's newspaper at the *Chicago Tribune*, because we shared many common experiences and situations.

Susan Was as Refreshing as the Wind

And finally to our last destination—New York. Here we saw our host, Peggy, for the first time since Los Angeles. With Peggy and Mr. Yamamoto presiding, the IIE workshop proceeded smoothly. At lunch, we listened to a presentation given by the Vice President of the Ford Foundation, Susan Berresford. I was first struck by her features. She is slender and of small build and her lucid eyes seemed to reflect her intelligence. She seemed as refreshing as the wind. I was impressed when she told us that under the present Clinton administration, many of the women who currently hold positions of authority had been involved with NGOs. This was because NGOs allow one to gain experience in various activities—finances, leading people, etc. This kind of experience can be put to immediate use in government. Listening to Susan, I realized that only women can blow a fresh wind though the confused Japan of today. However, only women with experience have the ability to do so. Therefore, if Japanese NGOs were able to educate people, then capable people would be easy to find. I believe that NGOs should form a network and collaborate to gain the power with which to influence government policies. The discussions at the workshop continued in the afternoon, and we had the opportunity to talk with Ruth from New York and Beth from Vermont.

The next day I visited Phyllis of the weekly newspaper *The New York Press*. We discussed common women's problems such as those related to menopause and childbirth and were surprised by how differently each country tackled these issues. We agreed that each country should refrain from extremes and that women should be given more freedom of choice.

Thank You For All the Enjoyable Experiences

While on this study tour we were able to come in contact with many aspects of American culture. In Los Angeles, Irene took us to see a mariachi band and a western dinner performance; in Chicago, Ronne took us to see a Chicago blues band; and in New York we saw the Broadway musical *Miss Saigon*. Each of these productions reflect American culture, and they all touched me. I cannot explain how much they moved me. I would like to thank all those who welcomed me to this wonderful program.

First of all, Ms. Katsumata. Her perfection and kind heart were impressive. I also express my gratitude to Ms. Iijima, Mr. Yamamoto, President of JCIE, Peggy and Shaun of IIE, and also Mr. Wada of CGP.

On my table is a merry-go-round horse I bought in Spokane. It is as if I rode around and around on a merry-go-round for those two weeks. Now the music has ended and I have returned to my everyday life. I am now quietly contemplating how to put to use what I saw and experienced during those two weeks.