

Takarabako

たからばこ

September 2010 No. 25



Contents

Meeting People Special

The Deai Students: A Sequel



Photo: Otsuki Kazuhiro

Believe in Your Dreams



Photo: Murashima Midori

I Found My Niche



Photo: Yamamoto Takayuki

The Rewards of Ten Years

Publisher/Editor in Chief:
Nakano Kayoko

Editing and Translation:
Center for Intercultural
Communication

Graphic Design:
Iino Noriko (The Japan Forum)

Otowa YK Bldg. 3F
1-17-14 Otowa, Bunkyo-ku,
Tokyo 112-0013, JAPAN
Phone: 81-3-5981-5226
Fax: 81-3-5981-5227
E-mail: takarabako@tjf.or.jp
http://www.tjf.or.jp

Takarabako is published and distributed by the Japan Forum. This publication follows the practice of placing the Japanese surname first.

Meeting People Special

The Deai Students: A Sequel

Nearly ten years have passed since the Japan Forum published *Deai: The Lives of Seven Japanese High School Students* (www.tjf.or.jp/deai), introducing real-life portraits of seven Japanese high school students through photos, stories, and videos. For this issue we returned to three of these students and asked them to give us the sequel to their high school story, sharing their thoughts and experiences as they charted their way in life. For junior high and

high school students, these stories offer useful hints as they consider how to continue their education and choose their careers, and what kind of lives they want to lead.

* Class activities can be developed tying together the Deai Students as they are today and the way they were in high school. We hope teachers who have explored this approach to using these resources will let TJF know about their efforts.

* Messages from the three Deai students will soon be posted at www.tjf.or.jp/clicknippon/en/

When they were in high school



Tamaki Shun'ichi

Tamaki Shun'ichi grew up on Izena Island in Okinawa prefecture and attended junior high school there. He studied Okinawan performing arts and history at senior high school on the main island of Okinawa. He went through a period of rebellion and troublemaking in elementary and junior high school, but after joining the Izena Shoen-daiko drum ensemble in his second year of junior high, he discovered his love of music. He later tried out his skills by giving street performances of songs he had written himself, and began to dream of becoming a singer-songwriter. A gregarious and cheerful fellow, he had many friends, but he was also sensitive, sometimes anguishing over difficulties and problems he faced.



Yoo Yoo Jin

Born and reared in Osaka, Yoo Yoo Jin is a third-generation Korean resident in Japan. Growing up in a context in which "home" was Korean culture and "outside" was Japanese culture, Yoo Yoo Jin has two different cultures coexisting inside her. She attended an international school that encouraged students to be assertive and independent. Struggling with the gap between the strict supervision characterizing her tradition-oriented family life and the assertiveness and self-motivation encouraged by her school, she took time off from school for about six months. After resuming attendance, she began to really enjoy high school. She also discovered how much she loved sports. She dreamed of becoming a sports counselor. Full of curiosity, she would even miss getting enough sleep as she pursued something of interest.



Yamamoto Takayuki

Photos: TJF

Born and reared in Kyoto, Yamamoto Takayuki has had a hearing disability since birth. His life changed a lot after he began to play American football in third grade, as he developed his athletic talents and broadened his communication skills through interaction with his teammates. Positive of disposition, he threw himself wholeheartedly into anything he discovered he liked. He didn't like to be treated specially because of his hearing disability. He wanted to be accepted just like anyone else. Takayuki went on to a high school known for its strong American football team, and thought that he would probably continue playing football even after graduation from university and taking a job.

Applications now open!

Photo and Essay Division for high school students of the 32nd "Yomiuri Photo Grand Prix" 2010.

Deadline for submission : November 20, 2010

Prizes and awards :

***Grand Prix**: Award of round-trip airfare to Narita of up to ¥300,000 (for prize-winner and one parent or guardian;

costs exceeding ¥300,000 to be borne by the travelers).

***Second Prize**: Award to one person of prize worth ¥50,000, selected by the Yomiuri Photo Grand Prix Secretariat (including shipping)

***Third Prize**: Award to one person of prize worth ¥30,000 (same as above)

***Other Prizes**: Award to ten people of a small bag.

Details: www.tjf.or.jp/thewayweare2/en

Believe in Your Dreams

**Tamaki Shun'ichi, 28,
singer-songwriter,
Okinawa**

Read his high school story here:
www.tjf.or.jp/deai/contents/search/photo_top

Shun'ichi's official website: <http://irei.syncl.jp/>



Photo: Nakajima Yuko

University major in classical Ryukyuan music

I wanted to be a singer-songwriter ever since I was in junior high school. After graduating from high school, I entered the Okinawa Prefectural University of the Arts to broaden my musical perspective. Just as I had in high school, I majored in songs and *sanshin**1 lute in classical Ryukyuan music*2 in university.

My education in classical Ryukyuan music theory and techniques in university helped me broaden my perspective on how the *sanshin* is played, and this has become the basis of my music and songwriting today. I love classical lyrics because they allow listeners to visualize their own landscapes and let their imagination take flight. Through the lyrics, we can also learn about the thinking of the people of Okinawa in the past. One of my favorite lyrics goes something like this: "Flowers bloom beautifully only after enduring a cold winter." When I was feeling discouraged, this lyric really cheered me up. I realized that what people think about and treasure really doesn't change that much.

While in university, I devoted most of my time to my studies, rehearsing for classical music performances at university, and playing classical music and Okinawan folk songs (*min'yo*) at public events. I wasn't spending much time writing or performing my own songs back then.



Photo: Nakajima Yuko

Rehearsing for a concert.

*1 三線 (さんしん) Three-stringed plucked lute played in the Okinawa and Amami islands. Thought to have been introduced from China between the fifteenth to early sixteenth century, it is popular as the primary instrument of Okinawan classical music and folksongs.

*2 Music played in the Imperial Court of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429–1879).

On the path to becoming a singer-songwriter

I actually didn't start thinking about what I wanted to do after graduation until September of my fourth year of university, when my classmates were already starting to hunt for work and accept offers of employment. I got a late start because I had been engrossed in my studies and performances in the first three and a half years, and also because I had known that I wanted to somehow pursue a career in music.

There were people who suggested that I work for the Okinawa prefectural office or for the village office in Izena. I considered it briefly, but I couldn't see myself working in anything but music.

During my university years, I won first place in the song and *sanshin* category in the Afuso-style classical Ryukyuan music competition. I had also acquired the license to teach *sanshin*, so I could have chosen a career in classical Ryukyuan music. In the traditional world of Ryukyuan music, you must spend many years training with a teacher and play precisely



Photo: Tamaki Shun'ichi

Relaxing by playing computer games with my brother at home.

as you are taught before you can begin to make small adaptations in your own style. I appreciate that, too, but I definitely feel happiest when I can express myself in my own, creative way. I realized that I gain the most fulfillment from singing my own songs for people to hear.

Even though I started thinking about my career quite late, I came to a conclusion quickly. I had no doubt: I was determined to start my life as a singer-songwriter as soon as I finished university.

One dream comes true

After graduation from university, while supporting myself with a part-time job at a pharmacy and by playing classical music and Okinawan folk songs, I wrote songs and gave live performances. My goal was to release my first CD, so every time I wrote a new song, I visited a music producer living in Okinawa. I would wait in the back quietly until the producer's work was finished, and as soon as there was a moment, I would ask, "Could you listen to my song, please?" At first, I wasn't taken very seriously, and was always told to come back when I had written a new song, but I didn't give up. I continued to work and rework my songs and visit the producer. After about two years of persistence, I finally came up with the song "Kassen soka 夏鮮想歌," a term I made up that means "vivid summer memories." The song is about someone falling in love with a girl at a summer festival on an island. Even though the relationship doesn't last, it becomes an important memory for the character in the song. He feels happy at the thought of her, probably striving towards something, somewhere. The producer really liked this song and agreed to put out my debut single. I will never forget the happiness I felt when that dream came true.



Photo: T/F

Many of my songs in concert feature the *sanshin*.

I can't sing!

I signed on with a music agency, and quit my part-time job so that I could concentrate on music. With the release of my mini-album and appearance in a TV drama broadcast by an

Okinawa station, I was steadily walking down the path to becoming a professional musician.

In December 2008, however, about a year after I became a professional, I was faced with one of the biggest trials of my life. At the time, I had been training my voice to be louder and deeper so I could give powerful performances on stage. I was trying out different methods according to advice from various people and books. Then one day, all of a sudden, my throat went hoarse and I lost my voice. I had injured my vocal cords straining it in a way that I wasn't used to.

I was desperate to regain my voice, but the more I struggled, the worse the symptoms became. I couldn't even sing scales properly. I had no desire to appear on stage, but concerts had been booked far in advance and couldn't cancel them to give my voice a rest. Frequently, I would be close to tears during my performances because I couldn't sing properly in front of thousands of people. Everything had been fun up until then, but I learned then how tough it is to be a professional musician. I began to realize that no matter what I might do, my voice might not return to normal. I might have to quit music. In the end, I didn't quit because I couldn't see myself as anything but a singer-songwriter.



Photo: Otsuki Kazuhiro

Shooting a promotion video on an Izena Island beach.

Believe in your dreams

Just then, I was reading a book about how to succeed in fulfilling your dreams. It advised keeping your dream clearly in mind and committing yourself firmly to making it come true. What I wanted then, despite facing the loss of my voice, was to be able to give the best possible *sanshin* performance, to sing in the best possible condition, and to inspire my listeners. From that day on, I resolved to imagine myself in the best possible condition. When I prepared for my performances, I made up my mind to properly express everything I wanted to say and to give a performance that would move the audience. Eventually, I started to feel a little bit more cheerful and positive. I suddenly realized that there was no point in continuing to worry and to be negative. I became optimistic and determined not to give up, and finally I was able to continue my live performances while seeing a doctor regularly for treatment. My throat recovered little by little, and after about a year, I was able to sing as well as before.

It was a tough year for me, even looking back on it now. But it was an ordeal that taught me the importance of believing in your goal and firmly pursuing it. I became stronger mentally and able to see things from various angles. Without having experienced this hardship, I never would have reflected on my dreams and my professional career so seriously and I probably couldn't have endured the busy schedule that followed. Today, I'm thankful for those tough days that I endured.



Photo: TjF

Signing albums after a charity performance on Izena Island. I get specially nervous when giving performances on the island, but everyone is really warm and supportive.

About my music

As a singer-songwriter, I write, perform, and record my own songs. In the meantime, I also do promotional work, such as appearing on television or radio. Other than that—well, I guess my job is making people happy! (laughter) This year I made my debut with a leading recording company. I'm so busy right now that the only time I'm not working is when I'm asleep!

To me, a good melody is one that resonates within my heart. My music won't inspire others if it won't inspire me. My favorite kinds of melodies are those that are natural, like a gentle wind, or by contrast, those that have a lot of energy. I like lyrics that seem simple and easy to understand but actually have meaning that wells up in your heart. I don't really like the wordy lyrics that are popular nowadays.

I used to write a lot of love songs in the past, but now I am more interested in writing lyrics with broader themes that move people deep down inside. For example, instead of a song about a specific love story, I might write, say, about what love is. Before I released my first single, when I was writing many songs to perform live, I thought to myself, "What's the point of singing regular love songs?" Of all

Looking back on my high school years

I was generally a cheerful guy in high school, but I often went around in circles worrying about little things and why they happened. You tend to worry about things people say when you don't have confidence in yourself. Come to think of it, since I was a child, I never had much confidence in myself and was afraid of being disliked. I used to feel alone even in a large group of people at school because I felt that people were leaving me out or talking about me behind my back.

Nowadays, when I'm feeling down, I think about what I can do about the situation. The experience of losing my voice actually helped me think this way. I was feeling more and more depressed, worrying, and thinking, "Why can't I sing? Will I never sing again?" In midst of that ordeal, I realized that there was no point in continuing to worry.

There were times when I reacted emotionally to things that people said. Now, I just think, "I guess this person is going through a tough time." Even when I get irritated about something, it's never anything serious when I look back on it later. There's no point in thinking over and over about why someone said something, and it's a shame to expend energy like that. I calm myself down and reflect on what happened, and if it was my fault, I try not to repeat the same mistake. If I come to the conclusion that it was somebody else's fault or that the argument was unreasonable, there is no use worrying about it. By reassuring myself in this way, I don't have to worry needlessly and can focus on what's most important to me.

If I could talk to myself as a high school student, I would tell him, "I'm sure you will encounter hardships in the future, but you become stronger each time you overcome them. Every tough experience is a step toward your dream. No wall is too high for you, and once you climb over that wall, you'll find the world you're looking for." I'd like to send the same message to all the junior high and high school students today. I would be very happy if talking about my own experiences gives a little more courage to people who are working toward their dreams.



Photo: TjF

Photo from Deai: *The Lives of Seven Japanese High School Students* (www.tjf.or.jp/deai).

しゅんいちさんのメッセージ

自分の夢のためにがんばっているとき、

かべにぶつかる*1 ことがあります。

それは、あなたが成長するチャンスです。

だから、あきらめないで、がんばってください。

かべをこえたら*2、あなたの夢に近づくことができます。

ぼくも、自分の夢のために、がんばっています。

これからも、いっしょに、がんばりましょう!



Photo: Otsuki Kazuhiro

*1 to come up against a wall, to encounter a hardship

*2 to overcome a barrier, to overcome difficulties

the different performances I've seen, the ones that inspired me most were ones where people were being themselves and expressing themselves freely. When I saw a band from Osaka singing in the Osaka dialect and just being themselves, I thought, "This is it!" People from Osaka have their own dialect that they use in everyday life. I have Izena Island, my hometown, the Okinawan dialect, and the *sanshin*. I think that when the listener can feel the writer's roots in the music, people feel inspired, whether or not the artist sings well or the melody is good.

Today, the fact that I'm from Izena in Okinawa is part of my identity as a singer-songwriter, but I don't consciously write and sing songs about Izena itself. It is an unchangeable truth that I was born on the island, and if I had not started *taiko* drumming in Izena, my career in music would never have begun. My birth and childhood in Izena are the origin and essence of my existence. Basically, I'm trying to express everything within me as best I can through music. In other words, I only want to write songs about things that come from within me. When I feel that a lyric isn't quite right or that I don't feel like singing a particular song, they generally aren't based on my own experiences, words, or something coming from myself.

I write songs that carry the message, "A lot of things happen in life, but I'm striving to do the best I can." I feel

happy when people listen to my songs, so I want to tell my listeners, "I'm doing my best in my own way. Let's all do our best and be happy."

Plans for the future

I would like to become an artist with a distinct presence in Japan. I have the feeling that I can do it: to be a successful artist, who may own several houses and drive a Ferrari, but who remains pure at heart and is loved by everyone! Eventually, I want to tour around the world and have more people listen to my music. It would be great if my songs were featured in Japanese or foreign textbooks and if *sanshin* became a popular instrument around the world. (laughter)

I would also like to do as much as I can to help the Izena Island community. I've already done a few charity concerts on the island and donated proceeds from them to the local junior high school. I would like to continue to participate in events to help revitalize the island or maybe live in Izena when I'm famous and contribute taxes to the island . . . well, I'm going to have to become popular first, won't I!



Photo: Tamaki Shun'ichi

Writing a song at home.



Photo: TjF

Giving a speech at the junior high school on Izena. I wanted the students on the island to know "you can achieve your dreams."

Let's Try!

After reading the stories by Tamaki Shun'ichi, Yoo Yoo Jin, and Yamamoto Takayuki, can you guess which one wrote each of the following paragraphs? Please write the reasons for your choice.

"Pick your own path and enjoy it." These words of one of my elementary school teachers have been my guide ever since I was little. Your dreams and goals shouldn't be decided by others, but by you yourself. When I've decided to do something myself, I believe in it and see it through.

1



When I was in high school, I thought "people are really hard to figure out," but now I love people. I think "human beings are wonderful."

2



In high school, I thought a lot about the issue of "nationality." I thought it was more important to consider the culture people were brought up in than what their formal nationality is. Now that I am in a quite different environment from high school, I'm no longer so conscious of the nationality issue.

3



The answers can be found at <http://www.tjf.or.jp/takarabako/bi02.htm>

I Found My Niche

Yoo Yoo Jin, 28,
insurance company employee,
Osaka

Read her high school story here:
www.tjf.or.jp/deai/contents/search/photo_top



Photo: Murashima Midori

University of My Second Choice

When I graduated from high school, I thought I wanted to be a sports counselor. I loved sports and I deeply admired the school counselor who had helped me so much. So I took the examination to universities where I could study psychology, not just that first year, while a senior in high school, but the next year as well. I could not pass the exams, however, and I ended up studying economics at a university not far from my home. By coincidence, it was the same university as Taka (Yamamoto Takayuki, see Meeting People-7).

Cheerleading and Coming to Terms with Society

The center of my university life was the girls' cheerleading squad. Almost every weekend we were busy cheering for university games, mainly the American football team on which Taka played and the baseball team. We also had practices for cheerleading competitions and onstage for the annual university festival, so I had club every day of the week except Mondays.

Cheerleading looks glamorous and exciting, but in fact it is a sport that demands a very high level of skill, so our training is hard and exhausting. I myself enjoyed the process of perfecting our skills, one feat at a time, more than our actual cheering at games. I was in charge of planning the team's routines.

Cheerleading turned out to be an excellent preparation for adulthood in Japan. My junior high and senior high education had been at an international school attended by students of many different nationalities. The atmosphere of the school was free and easygoing. At university, however, when I joined the girls' cheerleading squad I entered a completely different, very

traditional world of strict hierarchical relationships.* For example, if you met a *senpai* member of the club even outside the club, you were expected to stand straight, formally greet him or her, and remain unmoving in that position until he or she passed by. I simply could not understand why we could not greet each other with an ordinary "Konnichiwa," and I wanted intensely to avoid such situations. In

the beginning, if I saw a *senpai* member approaching, I would always flee the scene! But I loved cheerleading and wanted to stay in the club, so as time went on I gave up trying to escape, telling myself that if I just did what I was supposed to do, there would be no problem. Before I knew it, I had gotten accustomed to the formalities and went through the motions without thinking.

I now realize that if I had gone directly from the world of my high school, where students and teachers related to one another with complete freedom and candor, into the adult world of Japanese society, where superior-subordinate relationships must be respected, I would have had a very hard time. During university, while learning to treasure what is important in myself, I had the chance to learn for myself how to come to terms with the realities of the wider society of adult life.

Determined to Study Hard

About the time I entered my fourth year and began to think about looking for a job, I realized that I had spent my university years pouring all my energy into cheerleading and had only studied enough to get credit for my courses.

I had won various prizes and awards in sports during junior and senior high school and in cheerleading competitions during university, so I could be proud of myself, thinking of what I had achieved. I realized, however, that once I graduated and began working, I would need to have something more to show for myself. I had to seriously buckle down and study. I wanted to really master the fundamentals of economics—or anything—at least one subject I would know well. So I went on to graduate school and studied economics. In November of my senior year, I retired from the cheerleading club and concentrated hard on studying for the graduate school entrance examination. I was admitted to master's program at a university in Hyogo prefecture.



Photo: Murashima Midori

I often go out to the Namba shopping and entertainment section of Osaka on my day off.



Photo: Murashima Midori

Eating *takoyaki* in the America-mura near Namba.

Economics is interesting, as you learn how all kinds of things in society are closely interrelated—for example, how events that take place in a small country somewhere can have an impact on other countries on the other side of the globe, or how the influx of Japanese capital in the coastal areas of China ended up widening the economic disparity between inland and coastal areas of China. In graduate school I did research on foreign capital, the Asian market, and labor markets. The subject of the market in Asia and foreign capital captured my interest, I think, because I had seen close at hand how my father's company was manufacturing goods at factories in Korea and China and I had seen for myself the difference in the prices of goods on visits to relatives in Korea. I wanted to study the labor market because I believed that people are the basis of the economy. I wrote my master's thesis on "The Impact on China of Foreign Direct Investment."

Employment at Insurance Company

My plan after finishing my master's degree was originally to keep going to get a Ph.D., but just as I was about to complete my master's course, I began to wonder if that was the right thing to do. If I just continued studying without ever once taking a regular job, would I end up bookish and rigid? The older I got the harder it would be to stay flexible and adapt myself to various kinds of environments. So I decided that, while hoping to go on for a Ph.D. eventually, I would take a job while I was still young and see what challenges the world of work might bring. The usual period of hiring university and graduate school graduates had passed for the year, however, and the possibility of finding work at one of the think tanks where I had hoped to work was quite unlikely. Ultimately, I was accepted at a major insurance company where I had applied, barely in time, in late February, and I began working there in April.

I have now been working at this company for three years. I spent the first two years in sales, going out to the companies assigned to us to explain our insurance schemes and sell policies. To better gain our customers' confidence, I obtained second-degree certification as an affiliated financial planner. When I was in sales, I was happiest when I felt the customer really trusted me. This year I am responsible for training our personnel assigned to corporate sales. Since I am in charge of sales training for Okayama and Kochi prefecture personnel, I am away from my home office about twice a month. I have only just begun this work, but if the people I am training are able to turn my instruction into success in their jobs, I'm sure I will feel very happy.

In the company, I realized how much I had benefited from the experience with strict hierarchical relationships in my university cheerleading squad. The gestures and etiquette of greeting and speaking with superiors are ingrained in me, so that when a supervisor comes my way, I automatically stand and acknowledge the person. In my company, a person who knows how to be courteous is appreciated, and I think that



Commuting to work.

Photo: Murashima Midori

qualities that can make a difference in doing one's work are important.

At work, good relationships with my coworkers are really important to me, but I do try to think for myself and give my opinion and make suggestions when needed. In junior and senior high school, I was accustomed to an atmosphere in which we would openly point out not only good qualities in each other but faults and problems. In my workplace, people don't want to rock the boat, and most tend to keep their opinions to themselves. As far as coworkers of my own age and level or younger, my policy is to speak my mind if I notice something wrong. For instance, when I notice that someone is doing things in a way that could be a liability in doing the work of the company if not changed, I think it would be unkind not to say something. My way of bringing such things to others' attention is basically the same in all cases, but I find that some will accept advice and others reject it. Even if their reaction is negative at the time, I hope they will realize later, after they think about it, that what I said was right.

Work is sometimes very hard, so I blow off steam once a week by practicing kick-boxing!

Looking Ahead

In entering university and in finding employment as well, I ended up going places rather different from what I had dreamed about or planned. Still, I found enjoyment and interest there and the opportunity to discover new dimensions of myself. If things had gone like clockwork just the way I envisioned them, I might have become quite self-centered and my world might have been much narrower. So from now on, too, I want to keep an open mind and be ready to enjoy the things that come along unpredictably, responding flexibly as the situation requires.



Photo: Murashima Midori

On holidays I sometimes help my mother in her Korean restaurant. I'm not really sure why myself, but somehow I'm glad I'm a third-generation Korean living in Japan. I can boast of understanding the latest Korean television dramas or movies shown in Japan without dubbing or subtitles!

Looking Back on High School

In high school I was surrounded by people from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds who were extremely self-assertive and articulate. I knew that I would have to assert myself too if I wanted to survive in that milieu. Struggling with the gap between the culture of my school and the traditions of my family, I even dropped out of school for a while (see page 1). Every one of these experiences, however, proved valuable to me.

* At Yoo Yoo Jin's university the cheerleading club was made up of the boys' cheerleading squad (応援団 *oendan*) and a girls' cheerleading squad. The girls' cheerleading that Yoo Yoo Jin practiced is the same as that familiar at American football games. The atmosphere of the club was influenced by the *oendan* tradition in which cheering is performed in a distinctive style, often wearing black uniforms and shouting in loud voices. These *oendan* have strict rules about behavior of junior students toward their seniors.

The Rewards of Ten Years

Yamamoto Takayuki, 28,
university facilities management
staff, Osaka

Read his high school story here:
www.tjf.or.jp/deai/contents/search/photo_top



Photo: Yamamoto Takayuki

Effort from the Time I was Little Finally Paid Off

I entered university with the help of a recommendation based on my achievements in my high school American football club. In those days the unquestioned leaders of the university football league in the Kansai area were Kwansei Gakuin University, Ritsumeikan University, and Kyoto University; I chose a university that was second to those three in football, with the ambition of challenging their supremacy.

My university years revolved around football—I practiced six days out of the week. My position was defensive back, just as it had been in high school, and from my second year, I became a regular on the team. The highlight of my experience in American football came in the games when we soundly defeated both Kwansei Gakuin and Kyoto University. In both games, my intercept proved the key to victory. After that people in the American football world began to pay attention to me. I was just beginning to feel that my efforts in the sport, which I'd kept up ever since I had begun playing when I was in third grade, were finally paying off. Someone called me a football "genius," but my own thinking is that "genius" is 99 percent effort and maybe 1 percent talent. They had noticed the results of my confidence in myself and the effort I put forth. I have had a hearing disability since I was born, so I was really satisfied to be able to prove that a person with a handicap can achieve something if he or she tries hard.

Working for My Alma Mater

I had intended to continue playing football after university, even after I got a job, and during my fourth year, I received an unofficial promise of a job at a company that had a good team in the corporate American football league. Later, however, I was invited to take a job at my university. I knew that if I took the job, I wouldn't be able to go on to play in the corporate league, so I really anguished over the decision. At the same time, my desire to be of service to the university that had given me such a secure and fulfilling four years grew stronger, and ultimately I took the university job.

How Working for Oneself Becomes Working for the Organization

My job is with facilities management at my university. In addition to overseeing repairs and remodeling of facilities on campus, I am responsible for researching the anticipated needs and aspirations of students coming into the university, proposing plans for maintaining and improving the facilities in accordance with my findings, and then implementing those plans to completion.

My first year on the job, all I could do was to follow the directions of my supervisor. Then one day we received an inquiry from outside and I found that I couldn't explain properly what

we were doing; I had been too passive. So after that I decided I would think for myself, even before being told what to do, and prepare myself to be able to make suggestions of my own. You can just do what you are told, but if you come up with a plan and then work to carry it out on your own responsibility, the sense of accomplishment you feel when you are done is completely different. Ever since then, I have tried to work for my own sake, knowing that if I do so, it will be for the benefit of the organization I work for.

My policy is not exactly that of the old saying *ishi no ue ni mo sannen* (if you sit tight for three years, even a cold stone will be warmed through), but more like "sit tight for 10 years"! It was after I had continued practicing American football for more than 10 years that my effort was recognized. In a job or whatever you are doing, if you work hard, with enthusiasm and purpose, you can make something of yourself. I have been working in this job for only six years. By the time I have completed 10 years, I'm sure I'll have an even better understanding of it.

What Lies Ahead

Right now I'm busy completing the tasks and solving the problems I encounter day to day and I don't have any clear long-term goals. I just hope I can use to full advantage the strength and perseverance and the knack for turning adversity into growth I acquired in the process of overcoming my hearing disability in practicing football.

I am sometimes asked to talk to students at elementary and junior high schools about my experiences, and I hope I can continue doing that as well. Even now I am often made aware of the disparities that separate people with disabilities from the rest of society. I myself was fortunate to be employed in the "regular hire" category, but there are many people with disabilities who, no matter how hard they try and no matter whether the skills they possess are superior, are employed in the "disabilities hire" category. And they find it almost impossible to win increased pay or promotion. Many face ill-treatment and meanness because of their disabilities. What I think I can do is to keep explaining to the elementary and junior high school students who will be the leaders of society in the future that people with disabilities are trying hard. Other people in society need to recognize the effort they are making. I can remind them that people with disabilities may look different from others, but that all people are equal. No one should ever be discriminated against or ill-treated.



Photo: Yamamoto Takayuki

During university, I still coach the American football team at my alma mater every weekend.