

My Story

Sakai Michi

さ かい み ち

Me in a Nutshell

To be perfectly frank, I am a stubborn person. I've been this way since I was small. When I was in elementary school, my mother or my teachers might scold me for having done something wrong, but until I understood where it was that I was wrong, I would never apologize. I am also cautious, so I have a hard time making decisions quickly. Once I do set myself a goal, however, I pursue it without wavering. I don't change my mind even if I encounter obstacles along the way.

I don't know much about computers yet. I prefer letters to e-mail. I'm a creature of the "analog" society who prefers traditional *rakugo*⁴ storytelling and historical plays to the latest popular TV dramas. Because I'm like this, my friends in the upper grades of elementary school and early junior high school used to call me "Bachan" (Old Lady/Granny).

I believe in enjoying everything we have right in our daily lives. I undertake everything I do willingly and am determined to enjoy it.

Growing Up

Preschool years

I was born in 1983 in Chiba prefecture.¹ I was an energetic child and I played outside a lot. The friends I played with were all of different

ages, and that helped me learn how to get along with other people in general.

When I was small I was a rolypoly overweight kid. I expended a lot of energy running around out-of-doors, but I wasn't all that well coordinated, and I often got hurt. In kindergarten I cut myself falling off the swing and had to have stitches on my forehead, and I caught my leg in a box swing and couldn't walk for a while. I rarely caught cold, but apparently I would run a high fever from swollen tonsils now and then.

Elementary school

From the beginning of elementary school, I developed a keen interest in insects and animals. According to my mother, I would read the illustrated books about insects and animals almost as if I were "swallowing" them. Near our house was a place where there were lots of little green tree frogs, and I used to catch them and bring them home. I collected all kinds of creatures—ants, butterflies, helmet beetles, snails, lizards, frogs, goldfish, and turtles. I loved going to zoos and aquariums, and often went to the Ueno Zoo. I would make my mother or father wait while I went around the pens two or even three times. I never tired of watching the monkeys on "monkey mountain." It was interesting to try to guess which one was the boss monkey. When I was small, I just loved watching animals, and later on, I

would repeat what I had learned from books in explanations to whomever in the family had brought me along.

Apparently I had a penchant for wanting to run things. In school I was always either a class representative ⁵ or head of a *han* (subgroups formed for various class or school activities). After school once a week I went to learn calligraphy, but on all the other days, as soon as I got home from school, I would go out to play with my friends in the neighborhood. Our playground was the street right in front of our house, and we played jump rope, hide-and-seek, and dodge ball.

I loved playing outside, but indoors, too, I also loved reading books and listening to the stories my grandparents would tell.

Junior high school

When I entered junior high, I joined the *kendo* (Japanese fencing) club. One of my childhood friends next door was taking *kendo* and that made me want to try. Then I found out the club was a strong club that wins city-wide tournaments in Ichikawa ² and often participates in the Chiba prefecture-wide tournament. Practice was extremely demanding and exhausting.

My love of animals and all kinds of living things was as alive as ever, I read every book I could find on the subject. I am pretty sure my name is on the borrowing card for every book relating to animals in the school library.

When I got home from school every afternoon, my mother and I would go shopping for the evening meal. Later, whenever I had time, I would go up to my grandparents' rooms on the second floor, where I would watch television and listen to tapes of *rakugo* storytelling

with them. I enjoy talking with my grandparents in a way that is quite different from the way I talk to my friends. I always loved listening to stories of the old days. I also loved watching my grandmother as she went about making meals, knitting, or other housekeeping activities. Whenever I am watching her doing them I always felt somehow relaxed and calm.

Encounter with Shibechea

When I was in junior high school, there was an exchange program going on between my city, Ichikawa, and the town of Shibechea ⁶ in Hokkaido. ³ Called the "Shibechea-Ichikawa Youth Cruise," it sponsored an annual program in which elementary, secondary and university students from both municipalities would visit each other by ship. The thought of going to Hokkaido (a place I had never been to before) and of getting on a big cruise ship was so exciting that I was eager to participate.

The two nights and three days onboard the ship between Tokyo Bay and Shibechea turned out to be agony! I was seasick the whole time. My only happy memory of that voyage was seeing a rainbow over the ocean. When the harbor at Shibechea appeared on the horizon, all I could think was that I had survived. Once on land, however, I was back to my normal energetic self, and I had a great time, going canoeing, riding horses, meeting junior high school students from Shibechea, eating barbecue, and enjoying campfires. That was the first time I visited Shibechea High School. We toured the school and participated in a butter-making project. I remember thinking what a spacious, attractively built school it was.

High School Life

Entering Shibecha High School

In third year of junior high, when I was considering what high school I should attend, I remembered Shibecha. It has dormitory facilities, so it is open to students from other parts of the country. I had been thinking, in order to fulfill a dream I'd had since elementary school of becoming a veterinarian, that I would like to go to university in Hokkaido after high school. Going to a high school in Hokkaido, where all kinds of information would be readily available, might be an advantage in getting into a university there. I decided to take the entrance examination for Shibecha. Curiously enough, I wasn't much concerned about leaving my family or the life of a dormitory student. When I told my parents, they were surprised at first, but they did not oppose my decision. I guess they just figured my departure had come three years earlier than originally planned.

My life as a dormitory student began when I enrolled at Shibecha. The dormitory makes us live a very regular lifestyle. We have to obey the rules. With a fixed schedule for meals, cleaning, and other tasks, we have to be constantly conscious of the time, which can be a bit confining. Still, I have been able to make friends with students in the other classes, which is one merit of living in a dorm.

Weekend homestays

When there are two or more holidays in a row, the dormitory closes. So, on the second and fourth weekends of each month when there are no classes on Saturday, most of the dormi-

tory students go home. Going all the way back to Ichikawa would be too much, so I have a homestay arrangement with the family of a classmate named Nao-chan.

Nao-chan's family operates a dairy farm in Shibecha Nijibetsu, about 40 kilometers from the school. There are eight in her family, her parents (I call them "Papa-san" and "Mama-san"), her grandfather, her little brother, Yoshiki-kun, who is in the third grade, and her big sisters. They also have a trainee, who lodges with the family and helps with the farm work. The weeks when I have homestay, Nao-chan's grandfather comes in the car to pick us up on Friday night. On Saturday, I play with Yoshiki-kun for about half the day. The rest of the time I spend shopping, relaxing in the living room, studying, and so on. I go back to the dormitory after dinner on Sunday night.

Before going to Hokkaido, my only concern about going to Shibecha High School was this weekend homestay. After actually experiencing those home visits, however, I stopped worrying, because the members of the family are all so nice. At first I was quite tense, but now I can relax there. When I am in my own home, I tend to fall into a kind of monotonous routine; I like life in my homestay household because the pace of family activities is so varied.

The first and third weekends of each month we spend in the dormitory with our friends. What I really regret is that the one bookstore in Shibecha is closed on Sundays! Without automobile transportation, we can't go much of anywhere, so our weekends when we don't have homestay are kind of boring.

About Shibechea High School

I really like Shibechea High School. The buildings are laid out in a beautiful setting. It is rare that we actually see any wild animals, but we hear the songbirds in the trees and see animal tracks on the trails so we feel the presence of wildlife right there around us in the woods.

We also have really interesting teachers. Most of the teachers have various hobbies like bird-watching, snowboarding, or fishing, and they love to talk about their individual interests. The teachers take turns, two by two, staying over in the dormitory, and I love talking to the teachers in charge. Sometimes we end up talking for two hours at a time!

The school is open to various new developments in education such as introducing new equipment like a horoscope and up-to-date biotechnology devices, or adopting new schemes like the *sogo gakka* system. ⁷

High School Environmental Summit

In August, I participated in the High School Environmental Summit sponsored by Oze High School in Gunma prefecture. Fifty-one students from sixteen high schools that actively practice and promote environmental education all over Japan participated in the meeting in Gunma prefecture. From Shibechea High School, four students, myself included, led by one of our teachers, participated. Held under the theme "The Global Environment," it was planned to promote exchange of information, consider the relationship between the environment and human society, and pursue nature study at a more advanced level. At the Oze Wetlands ⁹ in Nikko National Park ⁸ we did water tests, observed wildlife, and held discus-

sions with students from the participating schools. I don't usually talk about animals or nature with my friends, but the students at the summit knew a lot about animals and plants, so I really enjoyed talking to them.

What I prize most now is opportunities for "deai," like that summit, to "meet" people. One opportunity I had led me to go to Hokkaido in the first place, and as a result I have made all kinds of friends. At the environment summit, I made acquaintances from Gunma, Kagoshima, and many other parts of Japan. I don't think I would have had the chance for such rich encounters with other people if I had gone to a high school in my own home city. It seems almost a mystery that I happened to be born in the Sakai family. I'm going to treasure these encounters, which are really rather miraculous.

My Future

When I was in the early years of elementary school, I wanted to be an animal keeper in the zoo. Then, from reading books and watching television, I learned about veterinarians, and I began to dream of becoming a veterinarian. After high school, I'm planning to study veterinary medicine at a university in Hokkaido, and after I get my credentials, I'd like to work with protection of wild animals in South America or Africa.

People often say that the advancement of humankind has been made possible by the destruction of the environment, but I think that the twenty-first century should be a time for restoring what has been destroyed. We need to utilize the powers of science to solve

global pollution, global warming, and many other major environmental problems, but just as important is for individuals to commit themselves to the effort. We should carefully separate our trash and put out cans, PET bottles, and such for recycling.¹⁰ Conserving on water and electricity are little things that each individual can do. I do my best to think about conservation and recycling and if I try to raise the awareness of my friends and family, hopefully the number of people who contribute to solving environmental problems will gradually grow.

Family and Friends

My family

For me, family is my “home to go back to” or the “family nest.” Even when you are away from it, you know it will be there to welcome you warmly whenever you return. It is my family that accepts me just as I am, both my good sides and my bad sides. And because I have that “nest,” I feel I can go almost anywhere. Because I have that permanent nest of a home and know it will not go away, I never feel homesick. I think I was able to decide to go to school far away in Shibecha, Hokkaido, and not feel any qualms about leaving my family, because I have this solid nest.

My friends

My friends are very important to me. In junior high school, I managed to get through the hard practices we had in *kendo* club because of the encouragement and support of my friends. I keep going in basketball practice now because I have friends who cheer me on. Also, when

you’re living away from your family, it’s really supportive to have friends with whom you can share things both happy and sad. Once in a while someone among my dormitory friends will wail, “Oh, I want to go home!” At times like that you think, “Yeah, I guess we all feel that way,” and you know you are not alone. The good feeling of knowing that friends are willing to reveal their vulnerable side is also a kind of encouragement to me.

The presents I have received from my friends are all treasures. I have lots of these keepsakes—rings and picture frames from old childhood chums, letters, photographs, and such.

My only problems in friendship come in cases like when you have two friends, say A and B, and A doesn’t like B, and B doesn’t like A. It can be uncomfortable being caught between two people like that.

My Town

My high school town: Shibecha

My initial impression of Shibecha as a pretty town with wide sidewalks has not changed now that I have been here for some time. I think this environment, with its lush landscape and kind and friendly people, suits me well.

What really surprised me when I came to live in Shibecha was the oddities of local speech. For example, in Hokkaido they say “tebukuro o haku” (rather than *tebukuro o hameru* as we do in standard speech) using the verb, *haku*, that we usually use only for things having to do with legs and feet. Also, rather than “gomi o suteru” (throw away trash) they say “gomi o nageru” (lit., “throw the trash”)! I’ve learned a

few other phrases since coming here, like “azumashii,” which is the word for *igokochi ga ii* (nice, comfortable), and “azumashikunai” for *igokochi ga warui* (uncomfortable, unpleasant).

My home town: Ichikawa

My home is in Ichikawa, a city in Chiba prefecture. Along the Edo River, which runs by Ichikawa, there is quite a bit of greenery. It is really pleasant to walk along the embankment of the river where you can see far into the distance and enjoy a large expanse of sky. It's a convenient place to live because you can get to either the Narita International Airport or Haneda Airport in a relatively short time. It's a “bedtown” or residential suburb of Tokyo, but it is also a settled old community with an old temple mentioned in the eighth-century poetry anthology *Man'yōshū*,¹¹ and other landmarks. I like Ichikawa because it has both these sides—the old, historic side, and the new conveniences as well.