

1. Tell me about yourself...

I graduated from Sophia University, Faculty of Liberal Arts in Spring, 2019, majored in politics and history. I was a SVI-SJ scholar in 2017. Due to the supporting system for students with disability of the university, it took 8 years to graduate. I'm also a member of Toastmasters (a worldwide NPO which aims to train one's communication skills and leadership), and have been taking classical ballet lessons for more than 20 years (I have passed the Vocational Graded Examinations of the Royal Academy of DANCE—dancer's national license of the UK).

I was born and raised in Japan (mainly in Yokohama and Nerima, Tokyo), and I have never lived abroad. Right after my birth, I was diagnosed that I'm vision impaired, and my left eye doesn't work. My parents tried to educate me so that I can choose my jobs by myself—they gave me a lot of opportunities to challenge something I'm interested in; piano, classical ballet, English, violin, etc. It also related to various kinds of experiences in my university years: joining Sophia Philharmonic Orchestra, taking part in Japan-America Student Conference (JASC) as Japanese delegation (2013) and Japanese Executive Committee member (2014), Toastmasters (2012-), internship at one of the GAFAs, etc.

I started taking ballet lessons at the age of 4, and started learning English at the age of 7. My first English teacher was a mother of my classmate. Since English seemed to be easier than trying to read Japanese kanjis, I decided to study to enter Sophia University Faculty of Comparative Culture (current Faculty of Liberal Arts) when I was 12. Right before the entrance exams of the university in 2010, my eye condition got worse and I was told to take a surgery, but I couldn't give up taking the exam, and decided not to take the surgery.

Studying everything in English, under the American styled curriculum at the Faculty of Liberal Arts (FLA), was sometimes challenging. But it was great opportunity for me to learn politics and history of Japan, from the perspectives of other countries by reading materials written by foreign experts. Also, by studying with students from abroad without native level of "Japanese", I realized being able to understand both English and Japanese sometimes works "useful" in my studies. Also, after learning about politics of Europe and the United States, I realized I was more and more interested in history and politics of Japan.

FLA doesn't require to submit so-called "graduation thesis", and students write final essays for each class instead. I wrote three final essays for three classes—for Japanese history class, wrote about racial discriminations in Japan during the Pacific War, and as politics major, I wrote about the Emperor Showa and the Emperor Emeritus as symbolic emperors for Japanese politics class, and about the Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea for the communism class.

After graduating from university, I worked for a foreign finance company for about 7 months. I decided to leave this company due to the treatment of employees with disabilities. Since February 2020—right before the pandemic of COVID-19—I have been working for another foreign company, which creates electronic devices such as smartphones, tablets, computers, etc.

2. What is your relationship with CWAJ? Both your current position and any previous involvement?

I first heard about CWAJ when I took part in the 5th English Oratorical Contest for the University of Tokyo Trophy (current University of Tokyo E.S.S. Trophy) in 2010, when I was the 3rd year student of the Yokohama Senior High School of International Studies. One of the judges introduced this organization to me, suggesting to study abroad. After 7 years, I learned that CWAJ offers a scholarship program for students with vision impairments and decided to apply.

After being selected as a scholar, when I was a student, my relationship with CWAJ was simple—I was one of the scholars, and members of CWAJ were always supporting my studies. I was always feeling grateful, and proud of being their scholar. Their supports always motivated me to study hard, and it was always exciting to write and send report to CWAJ, about what I have learned in each semester.

After started working, I faced the difficult reality of the society for people with disabilities. When I faced “inequality” which still exists between the disabled and non-disabled, I sometimes tried to force myself not to take an action and stay where I was at the time. But when I looked back what I have been doing so far, what I said at the interview of CWAJ scholar selection in 2017 pushed me to take an action—at the interview, as a reason of applying for the scholarship, I said that I want to be a role model to prove that people with disabilities are able to work equally with non-disabled, if they are given opportunities equally, with appropriate tools, supports and understandings.

When I was facing difficulties, and having hard times thinking what I should do, I attended the CWAJ 70th Anniversary Dinner using my very first salary in my life, and I met the people of CWAJ once again at the perfect timing. While I was talking to the members, listening to the speeches by the new scholars, I made up my mind to take an action to be who I am. After several months of discussions with the company I was working for, I decided to leave the company.

After this experience, I realized that CWAJ is not just an organization which offered me a scholarship. The people of CWAJ and the fact that I was their scholar, have changed my life. Without them, I wouldn't be here today.

3. How did your goals change (if they did) once you received the scholarship?

My basic goal hasn't been changed even after becoming a scholar—my desire to achieve the goal got much stronger. My goal is the same with the one I mentioned in the response of the previous question. Currently, in order to be a role model, I'm trying to share my stories through public speaking, or posting articles on social media. In order to prove that the people with disabilities can work equally in the society, I first need to work in the society with non-disabled

people, with appropriate support. Now I'm enjoying working for the current company, with my great teammates and managers.

After I received the scholarship, when I see the members of CWAJ, I feel that they are always focusing on who I am, not about my disabilities. And their attitude gave me another goal to achieve—to make people in the society to realize that one's disability(ies) doesn't (don't) define who the person is. When I see new people, they tend to focus on my disabilities too much, and their impression about me tend to be “vision impaired” or “disabled”. I always try to share about other things about myself, such as my hobbies, studies, or past experiences, but sometimes people don't give me the chance to talk. It can be said that people have strong stereotype against disabled people—weak, poor ones. After becoming a scholar, I'm trying to share who I am, not what I am through the opportunities of public speaking, and posting on social media. The impact I can leave is very limited, but if my 1,300 friends on Facebook read my posts, I believe it can be meaningful in some ways.

4. What would you say to your younger self if you had the chance?

“Be confident.” When I was little, and even now, I am not very confident about myself. I'm always worried if I'm taking the right path. I'm still young and not experienced, but I believe, there's nothing meaningless in our lives. Looking back my childhood, studying at normal schools as a vision impaired was sometimes very difficult; it was hard to make myself understood by my teachers and classmates, and I sometimes couldn't go to school. But one of my former classmates is currently the most precious friend in my life, who understands everything. At university, I couldn't take core courses since there were no supporting systems for students with disabilities, but I was able to graduate after 8 years, by taking long time to negotiate with the university staffs and professors to create supporting systems. After started working, I faced the reality of the society, but after experiencing difficult times, I could find a place which accepts me, without drawing a line between disabled and non-disabled. So I want to say to myself to be confident; when facing difficulties, there will be a path to take if I believe in myself.

5. What are your non-educational goals within the next 5 years?

I haven't thought about “non-educational” goals. I realized I have been thinking about my educational goals all the time... But if I have to choose a goal in the next five years, I should say “live a normal life.” For those who have disabilities, living a “normal” life can be difficult. As I experienced in the previous company, people with disabilities are rare to be treated equally. But since I could find a place where treats me completely equally, I'd like to live a normal life, just like others in the same generation. For the future people with disabilities, living a normal life would be the best way to be the role model as well.