

feature

FRIENDS OF AUFW JAPAN

by Hilary Wendel

Various scenes from the newly-developing Asian University for Women.



all images: provided by Friends of AUFW Japan



One morning in 2005 Kathy Matsui was scrolling through the hundreds of emails that accumulate in her inbox daily. Delete...delete...delete, reply, save, delete, delete...As a partner at Goldman Sachs and head of Economics, Commodities, and Strategy Research in Asia, her days are back-to-back meetings, conference calls, and video conferencing. The inbox can quickly

time, she writes a quick but polite reply. "Sounds interesting, but I am so sorry that I cannot help." This time, however, Kathy could not bring herself to dismiss it so lightly. "I thought, if I delete this, it will stay in my conscience. It had all the elements that I myself had been preaching about for years in my research on Womenomics... the importance of the diversity of women in

goal from the headquarters for the project in Boston. A Gates Foundation Challenge Grant of \$15 million helped bring legitimacy to the project, and 'cold emailing' Kathy Matsui in 2005 proved to be an important turning point for the project. Once committed, Matsui helped found Friends of AUFW Japan, recruiting others to the committee including the economist Robert Feldman, James Kondo, Yasuko Tashiro, and Erika Yamaguchi. As chance would have it, Matsui was having lunch with a few of these founding members at The French Kitchen in Roppongi Hills when Kathy Pike, a Temple University professor, walked by on her way to the buffet. Stopping to greet an acquaintance at the table, she was introduced to Kathy Matsui, who gave her a brief but passionate synopsis of the project. As the saying goes, the rest is history.

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overwhelm if not dealt with forcefully. She shows little mercy and there is no time for the frivolous...delete, delete. In addition to her appointed job, she also serves on her firm's diversity committee and is globally recognised for her work on the 'Womenomics' theme. Delete, delete, delete...An email from her husband about dinner and one from the school about an upcoming soccer tournament, a Girl Scout camping trip...file to the personal folder, and save. 'Subject: Asian University for Women.' What the heck is that? Kathy's finger hesitates over the delete button, but she decides to open it quickly and deal with whatever it might be. Little did she know, she was opening a new chapter in her already busy life.

The email is a plea from a fellow Harvard alumnus, whose name she has never heard before. Kamal Ahmad, a lawyer at the Asian Development Bank, writes to her explaining his vision for a new university to be located in South Asia with a mission to provide higher education for the women of Asia. Would Kathy be interested in learning more? In most circumstances when she is asked to take on yet one more demand on her

leadership, the education of women, and the role of Asia as a region." So she sent him a response that probably surprised him, "I would love to support your project."

Twenty years ago, Kamal Ahmand, a thirteen-year-old boy in Bangladesh, set up a classroom in his parents' garage to teach the slum children to read. When authorities tried to shut down his unauthorised classroom, he re-grouped, forming an actual school with financial support from a local NGO. From this small beginning a vision was hatched that set him on his current path. Kamal attended law school at Harvard and gained experience and contacts while working at the Asian Development Bank, but he never gave up on his dream of building a university where the women of South Asia could come together to learn freely. Thus, the seeds of the Asian University for Women were planted. An institution of higher learning that would be "international in outlook but rooted in the contexts and aspirations of people across Asia."

Today, Kamal Ahmad is working passionately and successfully towards achieving his lifetime

Pike recalls, "I didn't know Kathy Matsui, but I knew of her. Our kids are at the same school and I had heard about her on other occasions. Someone like Kathy Matsui is involved in a lot of different things, so our paths were bound to cross. Even before meeting her, I knew this was someone that I would love to know better and would enjoy working with. I also was immediately intrigued by the project." Soon, Pike was invited to join the AUFW working team and is now a member of the Board of Directors.

Individually, each woman is talented, but together as a team the two bridge the business world and the academic world. Pike brings her experience of being the vice-chair of Tokyo English Life Line (TELL) to the project and she is also on the Board of Directors for the American School in Japan (ASIJ). These positions have proven useful when it came to setting up an NPO



in Japan and in staffing the nascent university with professors. Matsui, meanwhile, brings her connections in the business world and her knowledge of finances and ‘closing the deal’ to the project. Through the efforts and fundraising of Matsui and Pike of the Friends of AUW in Japan, the project has advanced significantly.

In a relatively short time, the project has gone from dream to reality. One hundred and thirty young women of diverse cultures and backgrounds representing seven countries of South Asia arrived in Chittagong, Bangladesh in March of 2008. These young women had been selected from an application pool of nearly 1,200 to attend the Access Academy, an 18-month bridge program designed to prepare them for matriculation into the full fledged five year joint bachelors and masters program in the fall of 2010. The current teaching staff for the Access Academy includes 15 WorldTeach Fellows. Classes are held in temporary quarters while waiting for the buildings to be completed. The prize-winning Israeli architect, Moshe Safde, has developed the architectural master plan and the first building in the phase-based project is scheduled for completion in 2011.

In October of 2008, both women were invited to speak at a symposium titled, ‘Overcoming History; Rethinking Rights and Opportunities for Women in Asia’ hosted by the AUW in Dhaka. The symposium was timed to coincide with the inaugural celebration of AUW. A delegation of foreign guests and participants representing institutions who have partnered with AUW, such as California’s Stanford University, the Aalborg University in Denmark, and the Imperial College in London, were invited to the impressive

ceremony, which was sponsored by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The celebration was held in a tent on the 100 acre campus, the land for which was donated by the government of Bangladesh (and luckily secured through a congressional act). The keynote speaker was the Nobel Prize winner and founder of the Grameen Bank Dr. Muhammad Yunus, who is also a board member of the AUW. The students of the Access Academy presented to the visitors and participated in the inauguration ceremonies, presenting both a cultural and academic program that transfixed the guests. At one point, visitors had a chance to hear the incredible autobiographical stories as told to them by the students. “What these women went through to get here is inspiring and unbelievable,” says Pike. “Some of these women

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are the first of their family to go to school or to leave their village, others have been witness to wars, bloodshed, and murder.”

Despite the generous support of Goldman, Sachs and the Bill Gates Foundation, among others, the millions of dollars required for an institution of this scope pose a challenge. Pike and Matsui and their families, it should be added, are committed to the project and remain undaunted. “A few years ago the AUW was an abstract idea. Now it’s becoming more concrete...but we are realistic that success will not happen in a moment, but rather in a decade. We are committed to the long term vision,” states Pike. There will be successes and there will be setbacks, but Kathy Pike and Kathy Matsui will not be deterred and continue to believe.

Last month the Friends of AUW in Japan held its first public fundraising event in Tokyo, sponsoring a screening and dinner with the filmmaker of a documentary on women in Afghanistan. The event was held at the Sogetsu School and was attended by over 150 members of the Japanese and expatriate community, many of whom were hearing of AUW for the first time. The actual receipts from the event are not available at the writing of this article, but the organisers were pleased with the attendance and the goal of raising the public profile in Japan. Matsui is hopeful that the AUW will grab the interest of the Japanese. “It sometimes feels like Asia is so far from Japan, but Japan should play a greater role in Asia. This is our chance.”

Meanwhile, back in Bangladesh, courageous parents from Cambodia, India, Nepal, Pakistan,

and Sri Lanka have kissed their daughters goodbye, worrying about sending them off to a strange country with a different culture, but believing and hoping that the results will be worth the sacrifice. As for the girls, the future leaders of their communities and countries, what is foremost in their minds? Their most immediate concerns have often been whether they will like the local food (will it be too spicy?) or what they will be able to do in their free time in Chittagong (Starbucks...no, but there is a Baskin Robbins Ice Cream), which, if you think about it, are pretty standard concerns for most incoming freshman around the world!

More information on the Asian University for Women can be found at www.asian-university.org.

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