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A fascination with faraway places brought the international-estate planning attorney to the U.S. as a youngster

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AKANE SUZUKI'S Journey of 5,000 Miles

A fascination with far-flung lands and languages brought the international-estate planning attorney from Japan to the U.S. at 16

BY PETER LEWIS PHOTOGRAPHY BY REDSTONE PICTURES

WHO COULD HAVE GUESSED THAT A CASE OF sibling rivalry would help spark a life-altering journey to the Northwest?

Akane R. Suzuki was 8 years old, living in rural Akita Prefecture in Japan in the late '70s, when her older brother, a seventh-grader, started bragging about his proficiency in English.

"He would pretend to know far more than he actually did," recalls Suzuki, whose skill in the language—and fascination with the U.S.—has long since surpassed her brother's.

Now an owner at Seattle-based Garvey Schubert Barer, she has parlayed her mastery of English, self-described "nerd skills" and cross-cultural sensitivity into a thriving practice as an international estate-planning attorney.

For Suzuki, who has retained her Japanese citizenship, it's been quite a voyage since those grade-school days of being teased by her brother. She long ago realized he was just doing what older brothers do, but admits the taunting—along with watching Japanese-dubbed episodes of *Little House on the Prairie* and glimpsing pop groups such as



AKANE R. SUZUKI

- OWNER, GARVEY SCHUBERT BARER; SEATTLE
- ESTATE PLANNING & PROBATE
- WASHINGTON SUPER LAWYERS: 2010–2014;
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50 WOMEN WASHINGTON: 2012–2014;
WASHINGTON RISING STARS: 2004–2006, 2009





“Just like some people find computer science interesting, I find other cultures interesting.”
—SUZUKI

Duran Duran, The Police and Boy George’s Culture Club on MTV—helped motivate her to hone her English skills, the precursor to her aspiration to come to the U.S.

Sara Sandford, a law firm colleague and friend, observes that Suzuki is now so at ease with her adopted language, “often I forget that she’s not a native English speaker.”

Sandford was involved in the firm’s decision to bring Suzuki on as a summer associate while she was still in law school, and former Garvey attorney Tim Burkart strongly supported that idea. “She’s really just getting warmed up,” says Burkart. “She’s had a terrific career, and I guess it will get more terrific as time goes on.”

About half of Suzuki’s work consists of international issues, much of which involves Japanese clients living either abroad or in the U.S. She shines in situations in which clients’ circumstances trigger cross-border complications.

“Akane is very sensitive to the likelihood there are going to be a lot of things about the other [country’s legal] system that are unfamiliar and confusing,” says Sandford.

For Suzuki, 41, who lives in Bellevue with her husband, an elementary school teacher, and their 11-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter, the road from Akita to Seattle had its bumps.

Both her parents worked: her father as an adviser with a nonprofit group that helped low-income and elderly people find social services; her mother as a nurse. Having a working mother was unusual at the time, and it meant both parents were away from home a lot. Suzuki would spend hours solving complicated, giant jigsaw puzzles. Even her parents wouldn’t come near them, she says, but she derived joy from piecing together intricate brainteasers. It’s a skill that would stand her in good stead in her future career.

Starting in seventh grade, all Japanese students were required to study English, and by the end of junior high, academic tests indicated Suzuki was college-bound. She says she already knew that her destiny lay beyond the limited opportunities in Akita Prefecture. The book-learned English she was picking up in school left her hungry for more, and in high school she began to research student-exchange programs in the U.S.

One night, she presented her parents with her findings. “These are my top

choices,” the high school sophomore informed them, handing over some brochures. “Can you help me pick one? And, by the way, can I go?”

Laughing as she recalls the moment, Suzuki says she thinks all her legwork made her parents feel more comfortable about letting her go. Her mother agreed to accompany her to Tokyo to help nail down details, including listing her top three U.S. locations. She put down New York, LA and San Francisco—and was hardly surprised when she struck out, since those were the cities everyone wanted.

Instead, she got a place called Tacoma, which she started searching for on the East Coast, assuming the “Washington” was D.C. When she found it, a bit farther west, she was still reasonably happy, “because on the map it didn’t look too far from California.” The actual location turned out to be suburban University Place. And the placement turned out to be a disaster.

In retrospect, Suzuki believes that first host family was good-hearted—just unprepared to take on an exchange student. There were already five people, including two teenagers, sharing a three-bedroom house with one bathroom.

As a guest, Suzuki was determined to be on her best behavior. She also dedicated herself to doing well at Curtis High School, where she started earning A’s.

But the home scene deteriorated quickly. Sleeping in a trundle bed, Suzuki shared the daughter’s bedroom. She says the girl grew resentful as her grades paled by comparison, and as her mother began praising Suzuki for helping out around the house.

The lack of space to study in the bedroom added to her anxiety. She says she had to clear off a table in the family room, where a flea-infested dog ran around. One day in her ESL class, the teacher noticed she was covered in bites, and started asking questions about her situation.

After comparing notes with other exchange students, Suzuki decided to approach the coordinator of her student-exchange program, who was unsympathetic. Her message: “You should be grateful there’s even a home at all for you.” There was, after all, a shortage of families willing to take in exchange students.

Still, Suzuki never considered going home, both because she had dreamed of coming to the U.S. for so long and because

her middle-class parents had paid a substantial sum to send her.

Just when she figured she might be stuck, she confided in an exchange student from Mexico named Gaby who in turn told her hosts, Nancy and Floyd Smith, about Suzuki's plight.

Gaby's cousin was also staying with the Smiths, and she planned to return to Mexico after Christmas break. The Smiths, who had been hosting exchange students and serving as foster parents for years, said Suzuki was welcome to take the cousin's spot.

That plan got accelerated, however, after Suzuki informed the first family of her intentions. She says she was called "unrealistic, selfish and ungrateful" and told, "If you want to get out, get out now!"

The exchange-program coordinator also admonished Suzuki, then drove her and her belongings to the Smiths' house. Initially, she had to sleep on the family room couch, but was happy to be in a welcoming home.

Now retired after working 29 years as a Puyallup School District teacher, Nancy Smith recalls Suzuki as "remarkably self-motivated, organized; an exceptional student" with the best study habits she's ever observed.

For Suzuki, life was so improved that she asked the Smiths if she could return for her senior year if her parents agreed. Everyone agreed, and her parents insisted on paying the Smiths, who had seen none of the money the parents had paid the first family.

During her senior year, Suzuki realized she would be at a disadvantage if she returned home to continue her education, because Japanese colleges would look askance at a U.S. high-school diploma. She asked her parents for permission to continue her education in the U.S. Again, they agreed.

Because her high-school transcript included two years from Japan, where her grades were not nearly as stellar (grading on the curve there meant very few A's), her overall grade point average wasn't high enough to compete for the most prestigious U.S. universities. Money was also an issue.

She also knew she wanted to focus on something international. "Just like some people find computer science interesting," she explains, "I find other cultures interesting."

She won admission to both the University of Washington and Portland's Lewis & Clark College. She chose the latter because

of its reputation for international studies, and in hindsight, she says, also out of fear of getting lost among the huge student population on UW's sprawling campus.

Suzuki majored in East Asian studies. She spent her junior year "abroad," studying Chinese in Taiwan.

"I think it confused the heck out of people when I got to Taiwan," she says, laughing. As fate would have it, this also was where she met her future husband, who was from Bellevue and enrolled in the Chinese-study program at Williams College in Massachusetts. At one point, the two figured out they had both been inside the now-defunct Kingdome for the 1990 Class AAA football championship, when Curtis High faced Newport High School. She was cheering for Curtis, he for Newport. (Curtis won.)

As she entered her senior year at Lewis & Clark, Suzuki considered a future in academia, possibly in Chinese studies. She opted instead for "something more practical—something that would put me in daily touch with people, not books." Should it be business or law school?

A trusted professor suggested the latter. "She thought I had a very analytical mind and that I would enjoy the law," Suzuki recounts. "She had this feeling about me, and she turned out to be right."

Suzuki was accepted to several law schools, and this time selected UW, partly because it was relatively less expensive, and partly because it was where her fiancé would return when he finished his undergraduate work.

The pair got married in December 1996, right after her first-year law school finals (she doesn't recommend that combo) and a paralyzing snow-and-ice-storm that kept some guests from attending. Among those who did show up were Nancy and Floyd Smith.

After her second year at UW Law School, Suzuki landed a summer associate position at Garvey Schubert Barer, when she met Sandford and Ken Schubert, one of the firm's founders, who also took her under his wing.

Things worked out so well they offered her a spot as an associate. Before joining the firm in 2000, she spent an extra year getting an LL.M. in tax law at NYU.

Coming out of law school during the dotcom boom, many of Suzuki's cohorts were drawn to the excitement around IPOs, mergers and acquisitions.

Not Suzuki. She preferred estate planning. "The whole process is so intensely personal," she explains. She gets to dive deep into family relationships, keeping an eye on potential tensions. "I ask a lot of questions not only about them, but about their kids."

Estate planning is also less adversarial than, say, criminal law or even business deals, which invariably involve an opposing party.

"You're just working with your client to achieve their objectives," Suzuki says. When family feuds emerge, she defers to the firm's estate-litigation group.

In an article Suzuki recently co-wrote for a journal aimed at wealth-management professionals, she lays out some of the head-spinning aspects of navigating U.S.-Japan estate planning.

To start with, there is a profound reticence in Japanese culture to talk about death. "Many [Japanese] feel that talking about death will bring bad luck," she notes.

In addition, probate procedures are entirely different in Japan, and trusts are not used as they are in the U.S. Also, in Japan inheritance taxes fall on beneficiaries, not the estate.

As a result, it can be daunting to design an estate plan for a Japanese citizen who, for example, has lived and acquired assets in the U.S., then wants to return to Japan to retire.

Suzuki is still drawn to puzzling facts and the dizzying details and contingencies that can emerge in estate planning, both international and domestic. She admits to being bizarrely entranced by Excel spreadsheets. "I am such a nerd," she says.

These days, Suzuki gets along well with the brother who inadvertently helped chart her course in life.

"I don't think my brother even remembers that I was jealous of his getting to learn English long before me," says Suzuki. "He quickly lost interest. ... His English is pretty much non-existent now; and it's probably how it's been the whole time." 

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