

## KIYOKO AOKI, CHICAGO 'I Couldn't Give Up On the Fife & Drum Corps'

I was born into this practice in Kansas City, Mo., lived there 16 years, then moved to Chicago with my family, where I've been ever since. When I was nine years old, my mother had me learn piano and violin. Liking music, I was very interested in joining the Fife and Drum Corps right away. My then-Junior Pioneer leader tried to talk me out of jumping in at such a young age, but I was adamant.

I learned how to play the fife and eventually the flute, and I found I really enjoyed Fife and Drum Corps activities. Despite the struggles entailed in participating in the Fife and Drum Corps — such as my strict leader and very long and hot practices for parades and conventions — I enjoyed the feeling of accomplishment I got after every performance.

In any case, I came to Chicago in 1989 with a strong spirit. At 16 I was doing a pretty consistent gongyo, and I had about a whole two months' worth of group leader experience under my belt. About a month after I arrived, I heard about Andy Matsuda, a young men's division member *my age* who had been made Brass Band chief. Well, I made a very deep/serious cause when I heard this news. I thought to myself, "If *he* can be Brass Band chief, *I* can be Fife and Drum Corps chief!"

A month later, Akemi Bailey, the Fife and Drum Corps leader, told me it was time for her to graduate and asked me if I wanted the position. I was speechless. I told her I had no leadership experience and she replied, "Well, how do you expect to gain that experience?" I had no answer, and ended up accepting.

My first few years as Fife and Drum Corps chief were a disaster. I didn't know the joint territory staff very well, so I ended up taking the name list Akemi had given me and calling every single girl to let her know about practices — which I did not get put on the joint territory calendar. This was also when SGI President Ikeda came to the United States in 1990 and activities started to slow down.

Needless to say, there were complaints from parents who did not find out about practices. I went to rehearsals with two or three girls attending if I was lucky. Things got so bad at one point that I was told that our performances were discouraging the members.

I did have some support from my former Fife and Drum Corps and current Chicago Territory #3 leaders, however, and I ended up developing a Territory #3 Fife and Drum Corps who performed only for our meetings. These girls knew how to play instruments already. I found it very difficult to teach how to read music and play instruments to those with no musical background and at the same time prepare to perform for meetings.

At around this time, the Chicago Joint Territory was getting ready to welcome the Fuji Drum and Bugle Corps, who were to compete in Wisconsin at the Drum Corps International competition. The joint territory arranged an exchange performance with them on a high school football field. Well, I definitely did not have enough people to cover the main Gohonzon room's stage, let alone a football field, so I had a choice: either not perform or do something different.

By this time I was attending Northwestern University's engineering school, and had been in the marching band's Color Guard for about two years. I wrote a proposal to the joint territory to have a Flag Corps perform, and it was accepted! The joint territory even purchased 30 flagpoles and silks; I would be responsible for finding and teaching 30 people to twirl these five-foot-long flags.

To make a long story short, 30 boys and girls, many between the ages of 10 and 13, performed with the Brass Band playing "Devil in a Blue Dress." The boys and girls took up

a large portion of the football field, and although they weren't 100 percent together, it was our first success. It was definitely my first turning point.

Until the beginning of 1995, the flags would perform to music on tape for meetings while the band did its own performances. But then talks about a Chicago culture festival started popping up. Although performing to music on tape was nice, we thought it would be nicer to work with live music, so Andy proposed we join the band and flags together again and if it worked out, to make it permanent.

I agreed, and we let the culture festival committee know what was going on. Then, about three months before the culture festival, I found I was accepted for a summer-long internship with Motorola, Inc., in Tokyo — and it would last right up to the day of the culture festival. This was my second turning point. I had to figure out if the Flag Corps members were well off enough for me to leave them. After a lot of daimoku, I appointed two of my most consistent and responsible members as co-leaders.

I was also more at ease because of the support of a women's division member, who actually had previous drill experience. She also promised to help take care of the group. Not having missed a single practice until then, I had been thinking about developing the girls to have rehearsals without me, and I figured this would be as good a time as any.

I went to Japan and came back the day of the culture festival to see a very grown-up Flag Corps. I admit I had tears of joy after their performance. I was glad that we could watch the Color Guard from Japan, as they gave us a standard for which we could strive.

After the festival, things went back to normal. I returned to my former leadership position but continued to train a backup for me. I knew I couldn't continue in this position forever, and I also knew I couldn't graduate without being sure I had a capable person to take over. I was to graduate from Northwestern in December 1995 and leave for Japan for another internship with Motorola. Before I left the country, Andy and I tried to formalize the structure of what was now called the Music Corps, within which are three groups: the band, the Flag Corps and a new group of ribbon dancers.

I decided to formally graduate from the Music Corps before going to Japan, knowing that I needed to focus more on my studies as I went on for my Ph.D. in computer engineering. When I returned last August, however, I found it hard to isolate myself from the Music Corps. I continue to help out behind the scenes, which is nice because I can see how I helped these girls who've continued to come to rehearsals and perform during the last couple of years.

There were many times when I was told to give up the Fife and Drum Corps because it was just not working out, but I was never comfortable with that. Maybe it's because I'm arrogant or don't like to give up, but I like to think it's because I really feel that the Fife and Drum Corps, now the Music Corps, is one of the best opportunities for young people to not only grow and develop themselves but to get to know other young people in the organization and create enriching performances that encourage us and those for whom we perform.

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