

# The Journey of a Real Social Worker

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**Abstract:** A personal narrative explores the author's life from infancy to the present time in which she is a social worker. The author was born deaf, and her hearing parents' strong passion and desire for better Deaf education for her she and her deaf brother led the family to move from a rural district in Japan to the international cities of Tokyo, Atlanta, and London. The author's unforgettable inspiration from the years that she spent in Atlanta and London became her motivation to enter the path of social work and choose her post-secondary education in America. The author earned her Bachelor's degree in Deaf Studies and her Master's degree of Social Work as the first Deaf female member in her family.

**Keywords:** deafness, identity, advocacy, family, education, role model

## What is a Real Social Worker?

In May 2013, I earned my Master of Social Work degree from the University of Southern California, where I succeeded with many achievements. My professor, Dr. Murali Nair, first asked me to write my personal story around the time that I became a social worker. Until he mentioned it, I had never thought of myself as being a real social worker. Still, obtaining my Master's degree in Social Work was just the beginning; the first step of my new life.

For me, my definition of a real social worker is a role model who provides dreams and hope. Based on my personal experience, my definition has changed over the years. It is not necessary to be any more particular about defining a real social worker, as I believe that the unique character and individual personality of each person leaves a historical contribution on people and society in various ways. Each individual has a different interpretation of what a real social worker is, which is originally shaped by individual experience and passion.

Looking back on my life, I began to realize how much my parents had influenced and shaped me into becoming a social worker. Without their existence, I would never have been called a "real social worker." Here I write about my life's journey from infancy to the present to provide you a reference of how that desire developed.

## Born in a Hearing World

I was born deaf. My brother, who is one year older than me, is also deaf, but my parents are hearing. At the time that I was born in Japan in the 1980s, Deaf education prohibited using the method of Japanese

sign language (Nemoto & Ishihara, 1996). Instead of this, it was popular to train deaf children using the oral method, meaning an education accomplished through oral language (Nemoto & Ishihara, 1996). The method used included lip reading, speech, and mimicking the mouth shapes and breathing patterns of speech (Nemoto & Ishihara, 1996). Over time, Japanese sign language became slowly recognized but it was not accepted until the 1990s (Nemoto & Ishihara, 1996). It was believed that if Deaf children depended on sign language only, they would be unable to participate in a hearing society that had very few sign language interpreters (Nakamura, 2006). Because of this, my brother and I were educated the oral way.

However, the oral way was insufficient for me to communicate fully. I was also trained using a Japanese cued speech in order to supply greater communication access. The cued speech is a phonemic-based system of communication, which is a different style from American cued speech (Quenin, n.d.; Roffe, 2013). It makes a spoken language accessible by using the hands in different locations near the mouth as a supplement to lip-reading (Japan Deaf Children and Parents Association, 2001). In my early life, I mainly used the oral method in deaf and mainstream schools, while I used cued speech to communicate with my family at home.

## Attending a Deaf School

My parents were very surprised when they learned that my brother and I are deaf. Although generations of my family had never had deaf family members before, my parents raised us as "children with special personalities that God presented," and never as "children with disabilities." I was born in Japan in the Iwate prefecture, where my parents lived for my father's

work. My parents lived in the northeast rural district, and there were very little Deaf educational resources available. To seek better Deaf education, my parents decided to move to Tokyo, the largest city, where it was more advanced.

Until I turned six years old and transferred to a mainstream school in the second grade, I was educated in the oral method at a Deaf school. Those years were very tough for my parents. They worked so hard every day to raise my brother and me.

Outside of the Deaf school, society provided little support for Deaf people. There were no captioned televisions. There were no social services from City Hall unless my parents visited to ask for help (Yabe, 2000). Many curious, prejudiced and unsympathetic people asked my parents why both my brother and I were born deaf. Such questions hurt my parents sharply, but at the same time, motivated their parents' passion. My parents wanted to ensure that my brother and I received better Deaf education with the awareness of our right to a bright future.

Our lives settled into a first-grade pattern. Every two years in turn, both grandmothers visited from their distant rural areas and assisted my mother in raising my brother and me. Without fail or absences, my mother and my grandmother took my brother and me to Deaf school. We went to the Deaf school at 7:30 a.m. and either my mother or my grandmother stayed with my brother or me during the speech instruction classes in the afternoon. The classes often continued until 3 p.m. When another class had snack time, my class was at lunchtime, but I ate from my mother's handmade lunchbox during speech instruction. During the summer time, my mother made lunchboxes with ice packs to keep the food fresh in order to avoid food poisoning.

Finally, we returned home at 8 p.m. My brother and I went to sleep, but my mother and grandmother stayed up until 1 a.m. They were assigned to write daily picture books that described their kids' whole day, with all our conversations – all our spoken words reported in detail, including expressions like “ahhh” and “wooo.” Then, the reports were turned in to the teachers the next morning.

Those four years – three years of preschool and one year of first grade – were my early childhood. I

thought that experiences of my early childhood were a normal daily schedule. I thought that hearing children went to another preschool and took the same lessons as deaf children. I was so innocent.

### **My Mother, in the Hospital**

During those six years of raising my brother and me, my mother slept only five hours each night. My mother never rested from her writing of our childcare books from the time of our births. She never complained. My father always provided mental support for my mother. But after all of this, her health broke down. She was constantly in and out of the hospital from then on.

One day, I was playing on the ground at my preschool. Suddenly, my father came into the playground. I ran to him and hugged him.

“Papa! Are we going to home?”

“Your mom is urgently ill. We are going to the hospital.”

“The hospital? Where are my brother and grandma?”

“They are on their way to the hospital.”

“Is Mom all right?”

My father looked pale. I did not know what had happened.

When I entered a room in the hospital, I saw my brother, my grandmothers, nurses, and doctor surrounding the young woman who was on the bed. In the scene before me lay a woman with a very pained and tear-stained face. Her mouth was covered with an oxygen mask. Her thin, left wrist had an intravenous drip. Her eyes were tearful. That woman was my mother.

My mother was in critical condition. She had seen a bright light and was free from pain. She was ready for heaven. But at this moment, when her eyes caught my brother and me, ages six and five years old, she did not want to die and leave us. The light was gone, and pains came back. She screamed and burst into tears.

It was the first time that I saw my mother so close to

dying.

Since that time, I began to be aware of and pay attention to everything around me. I began to recognize that I am deaf and I am different from hearing people. At the Deaf school where I had learned the oral method, I could communicate fully with my deaf classmates with peace of mind. But my parents were aware that the Deaf school spent so much time emphasizing the oral method that my progress in coursework was slow and my level of study was low, when compared to other mainstream schools (Yabe, 2000). I sensed my parents' concern. I wanted to study at a mainstream school because I did not want to be behind in my studies when compared with hearing students who were my same age.

### **My First Mainstream Classes**

During my first semester as a second grader, I transferred to my local school that had a very different environment. My teacher and classmates had different lip movements, so I could not understand fully when they spoke unless they remained facing me when they spoke to me. I had to memorize all of the textbook and blackboard information. I also went to a special class at another primary school twice a week after regular school. I prepared and reviewed my lessons with my mother every day, and my mother regularly exchanged school report books with my teacher, and the number of her written books increased.

The communication level during early childhood was less complex than what occurred during puberty and adulthood (Ministry of Education, 2009). For example, I was a child who actively played outside. If I had a misunderstanding with my classmates, I did not care about it at all. It just did not bother me, and I did not talk about it. If I could not understand a whole lesson, I studied from the textbooks and notebooks, so I simply passed the tests. My classmates assumed that I could lip-read and hear everything with my hearing aids. Although this was not true, I believed that was normal.

I never thought how serious it was that I had missed so much in my early years – until I gasped after receiving an interpreter at a university for the first time.

### **Living in Atlanta, Georgia**

During my second semester as a second grader, my parents decided to move to Atlanta, Georgia. The reason was not just for my father's work, but also to seek what would be best for our Deaf education. We lived in Atlanta for two years, from 1995 to 1997.

My brother and I went to a Japanese mainstream school in Atlanta that had many American students. It was like an international school. We had many first-time experiences – our first pet dog, our first Halloween, a large-sized tree at Christmas and a Christmas performance, a conversation with a celebrity who looked like President Abraham Lincoln, a meeting with the first Deaf winner of the Miss America pageant 1995, a trip to the Olympic Games in Atlanta, a visit to the church where Martin Luther King, Jr. had been pastor, and our first family trip around America. Everything was so energizing and impressive.

The most impressive thing was our friends' positive thinking that was rooted in their daily lives. Our friends always told us, "Your Deafness is a 'challenge' gift from God. You have a special talent because you are Deaf. You are made to live to use your talent. So take courage and do your best confidently."

In art class, my teacher saw my portrait and praised me, saying, "Your portrait is excellent. You must enter Harvard University in the future." I was so glad and so motivated. I told myself, "I will do my best to become a famous artist!"

We learned one lasting thing from our teachers: to find children's small strengths and praise those strengths. In this way, the children's weaknesses are overcome by the steady growth of their strengths, which become their fantastic personalities. The positive messages from our friends and teachers pushed us forward, ever forward. My eyes were opened to new worldviews and the joys of learning. I was full of hopes and dreams, like King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

The two-year experience in Atlanta left an unforgettable mark of influence on my family's life. We would have never imagined all of this if we had never left Japan. The experience became the source of my family's original power, and resonates in our lives even now. That power has pushed us forward ever

since we left Atlanta nearly two decades ago.

### **Meeting Ms. Heather Whitestone, Miss America 1995**

My parents heard the news that Ms. Heather Whitestone, the first Deaf winner of the 1995 Miss America contest, came to a Deaf school in Atlanta, where my hearing aids were checked. My mother wanted to meet her, so she sent a personal letter, an Easter card and a Christmas card to her. My mother kept writing and checking the mailbox often. My mother never gave up. A few months later, my father received a call from Ms. Whitestone's Miss America office. "We are going to meet her!" said my parents, who were very excited. On May 1, 1997, we got the opportunity to meet her and her husband at a small ice cream shop near our home which was within a 15-minute drive.

When I first met her, Ms. Whitestone's gentle eyes melted my heart like ice cream. Her message of "You can do it," was deeply rooted in my heart and became my new dream. I wanted to become like her and succeed in the hearing world. I wanted to study at a university in America! I never imagined that my dream would come true ten years later.

Ms. Whitestone's message gave new hope to my parents. After that day, my mother became strong and healthy. Her face became bright and pink like a rose, and her smile was cheery like a girl's smile. I hardly believed that my mother had been in the hospital a few years before.

### **Returning to Japan, Seeking My Identity**

During my second semester as a fourth grader, my family returned to Japan. Once I transferred to a mainstream private school in Tokyo, the hopes and dreams I had found in Atlanta shriveled like a deflated balloon. Every morning during the commute to school by train, my heart was overburdened. My classmates were very kind, but I knew that there was a vast disconnect between them and me. I felt no sense of acceptance. I felt that they looked at just my deafness, rather than my entire personality. My hearing classmates' sympathetic eyes made me feel like an exception because of my deafness, as if they were saying, "She is Deaf, so she cannot do anything. I feel sorry for her."

When I returned to the country where I was born, I faced a cultural shock. I still enjoyed outdoor activities and I loved playing soccer. But when I ran onto the playground during my first gym class, no girls approached me, only boys. The girls looked shy and chatted quietly in the corner of the playground. I could not understand such girlish behaviors.

One day, a classmate told me that some classmates had left her out in the cold. The girl said, "I have been made of fun of by my classmates, as I am a cripple." The other classmates frequently questioned me about the girl, asking, "Well, do you like her or dislike her?" It was uncomfortable and I asked myself why they asked me such questions. I could not understand why my classmates were bullying or why they were being left out.

As a seventh grader, I transferred to a junior high school for girls. I was an honor student and never missed any of my classes. However, since I was near puberty at that time, my communication level had become more complicated (Ministry of Education, 2009). I often pretended to smile without interrupting, even if I could not understand a conversation. I was beyond my limit. I made desperate efforts to assimilate into my hearing classmates' environment, but I finally admitted my limitations, thinking, "I am Deaf, so I cannot do anything."

I was hurt and I was isolated. I could not express myself. I wanted to do something, but I did not know what to do. I began to question myself, "Why can't the oral method provide me with perfect communication? Why can't I be hearing like them?"

### **British Sign Language, My Freedom from the Communication Barrier**

During my first semester as an eighth grader, my parents decided to move to London in the United Kingdom. This reason was not only for my father's work, but also for my parents' desire to continue seeking for our Deaf education. My parents began to recognize what was missing from the oral method and started to look into the possibility of the sign language method.

At that time, my father lived in London from 2000 to 2001, my mother and my brother lived there from 2000 to 2003, and I lived there from 2000 to 2005. I

lived with my family until I was a tenth grader and then I lived in a dormitory until I graduated from a Japanese mainstream high school in London.

While I lived with my family, I commuted to the Japanese mainstream school in the daytime. Then, my family commuted together to a college to study British Sign Language (BSL) in the evenings. The BSL evening class was full of hearing students, except for my brother and me who were deaf. While many of my hearing classmates were fluent in BSL, my family struggled to learn BSL for the first time. We battled to learn both BSL and English, which were foreign languages to us. We had to use both a Japanese-English dictionary and an English-BSL dictionary every time. My mother made copies of BSL vocabulary words, created posters and put them on walls in our bedrooms, bathroom, and kitchen. We practiced every day.

One day, my hearing classmates invited us to join a Deaf youth club. My mother drove my brother and me to the Deaf club. At first, I stayed in the car because I was not confident enough to sign or even speak to a Deaf person. However, my brother walked into the club alone.

Then, my brother ran back and shouted to me, "There are many deaf girls!"

"No way!" I shook my head and sat tight – it was too late.

A group of deaf girls approached the car. They peeked at me through the car window, asking,

"Are you free? Why not join us?"

My brother grinned. "Yes, she is free."

My face turned red. I could not stay in the car anymore.

Thanks to my brother, I met one girl in the group. Together we found a kindred spirit and laughed. For the first time, I understood what she was signing. I was able to sign what I wanted to say. I felt like a small bird that finally had flown away into the blue sky from a forbidden gate after a long time. I thought, "That's the one!" That moment was when I first acquired BSL as my language.

Since I first realized that BSL was a real language, the distress that I had carried in my heart was gone at once. I was full of peace, joy and freedom of mind. My eyes shone. Every time that I saw people signing in BSL, I was excited to talk with them. After approximately half a year, I became fluent. After one year, I passed the advanced level exam in BSL. I was full of life, like a fish at home in the water.

My studying in English changed dramatically. Since I had never been trained in the oral method in English, I always suffered when my English teacher asked me to speak it. I was not up to par in English as a subject. However, once I became fluent in BSL, I acquired English rapidly, and it became one of my favorite subjects. I finally got myself back, and BSL became a part of my Deaf identity. The positive messages I gained from my stay in Atlanta called back to me again.

### **My Role Models, British Deaf Families**

Meeting British Deaf families brought my family a new future. There were many Deaf families in our community. One family was the leader of the Deaf youth club and worked at city hall as a social worker. A member of another family was the director of interpreter services at a college and also worked as an actor. These families attended the same local church with an interpreter every Sunday. My family socialized with the Deaf families and our friends at church, and they occasionally visited us at home. The British Deaf families were our family's role models. They changed my perspective toward my deafness. I stopped thinking of my deafness as a limitation. I began to think, "My deafness is my personality, so I can take pride in life."

In spring of my junior year, I moved to a dormitory and I stopped attending BSL classes, Deaf youth club and my local church, as I did not have a car. Still, I wanted to share all that I had learned from the British Deaf families. I decided to present a speech in BSL for an English speech contest, and I won. I also established a BSL club, contributed a BSL performance, and taught BSL at a special school as my community service. I wrote about my personal experiences in an essay for the Japan Airplane Overseas Essay Contest, and I was selected for an award of excellence and an overseas student scholarship. My article about BSL was published in

local newspapers in Japan and London.

### **Meeting the Late Ms. Mariko Takamura**

As I was approaching my senior year, my family read a biography written by Ms. Mariko Takamura (1993). She had studied as an equal among hearing students with the use of interpreters and note takers at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). Suddenly, I knew it. This university was the place that I had dreamed of.

On Christmas Eve in 2005, my father and I met Ms. Takamura personally. We were surprised that we had several commonalities in our lives: we had both studied at the same junior high school in Japan, met Ms. Whitestone, and loved Atlanta. Ms. Takamura invited me to join a group tour to visit CSUN in spring of 2006. I never imagined that the tour would be the last time that I would see her. She passed away a few days after the tour.

After returning from the tour, I showed a picture from the tour to my parents. My mother looked surprised.

“Is that the woman, Ms. Takamura, whom you met? I saw a woman who looked like her.”

“Where did you see her?”

“It was in a train. She was sitting in front of me, and then she took off after a few stops.”

“When did you see her?”

“Let me check...It was on May 7th.”

“Are you sure? She passed away on May 4th.”

Shortly after that, with mixed joy and sadness, I received an acceptance letter from CSUN.

### **My First Participation in the Deaf Community, Gallaudet University**

Prior to my admission at CSUN, I entered the English Language Institute (ELI), located at Gallaudet University, to study ASL and English. Gallaudet University is the only university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the United States,

and it has a variety of international deaf students from many other countries (Gallaudet University, 2015). ASL is a very different sign language from BSL (Sternberg, 1998; Thompson, 2002). The BSL Alphabet is produced using both hands, but ASL Alphabet is produced using one hand only. For example, when signing “Okay” in BSL, I put my thumb up. But in ASL, I spell “O-K.” During my study at ELI, I had to concentrate on the language with my eyes to become fluent in ASL within three months.

Even though I am deaf, when I first participated in the American Deaf community, I felt like I was on an alien planet. Everything was new. I had never felt labeled as disabled, and I learned that the American Deaf community has their own point of view with cultural values that differ from the hearing community (Padden & Humphries, 1990). When I talked about becoming a social worker to help deaf people, the Deaf woman from a Deaf family told me,

“It does not make sense to say ‘I want to help deaf people.’ Our Deaf community is a linguistic minority group. It is more appropriate to say ‘I want to empower Deaf people.’”

I was often told that I was so lucky to have a deaf brother and hearing parents who spent a large amount of money and time to support my brother and me to find better Deaf education. I learned that 90% of deaf children are born in hearing families, and most of hearing parents do not sign (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004). Many deaf children experienced being left out at home due to a lack of communication (Meyers & Barte, 1992). Although I experienced isolation at the mainstream schools that I attended, I still had a place where I was able to comfortably and fully communicate with my deaf brother and my hearing parents by using cued speech at home.

I was a lucky girl from a fortunate home.

### **My First Time Studying Alone, California State University, Northridge**

In fall semester of 2006, I entered CSUN. It was my first time living and studying alone. I thought that I was ready to take courses with an interpreter and note-takers for the first time, as I had studied ASL and English at ELI in the spring of 2006. But I was wrong.

I found that CSUN has a large number of American deaf students, but only a few international deaf students, which was different from Gallaudet University's environment. Most of my American deaf classmates grew up orally in mainstream schools and signed in Pidgin Sign English (PSE). PSE is not a sign language but rather a communication method to sign English words in order (Baker-Shenk & Cokely, 1980).

Many of my classmates signed and spoke in English at the same time, which was difficult for me to understand, since I had never grown up speaking orally in English. When they used PSE, I did not understand their signs. When I used ASL, they did not understand my signs.

However, studying at a university in America had been my dream since the age of nine, and my parents supported my entering CSUN. I did not want to spoil all my parents' efforts, and I did not want to miss the opportunity. I had longed for equal communication access for many years, and the opportunity finally came at CSUN. I wanted to earn my degree at CSUN as the first Deaf female member in my family generation.

During second semester as a freshman, I slowly became comfortable switching among Japanese, English, ASL, and PSE. I began to understand what my professors and classmates said and why they laughed, through the use of interpreters. Without this, it would have been impossible for me to understand lectures, pass tests, and complete my diploma. I often realized how important communication access was.

### **Miss Deaf CSUN Pageant 2007**

When I walked into the student lounge at the National Center on Deafness (NCOD) at CSUN, my eyes first caught a poster that said, "Sign Up for the 2007 Miss Deaf CSUN Pageant!" My mind flashed to the time when I had met Ms. Whitestone in Atlanta nine years earlier. Also, just eight years later, I met Ms. Takamura who had studied at CSUN. In her book, she described how she had entered a Japanese pageant and passed all sections except for the final interview. She failed because her judges found out that she was deaf (Takamura, 1993).

The pageant was not about the contestants' appearances, but focused instead on the contestants' leadership skills. At first I hesitated to sign up, as I was a new freshman who was trying to adapt to a new environment. But at the same time, I recalled Ms. Whitestone's smile and her message, "With God's help, everything is possible," and the late Ms. Takamura's eyes that were filled with passion. I wanted to thank my parents, Ms. Whitestone, and the late Ms. Takamura in heaven for pushing me forward to grab my dream here, so I decided to join the pageant.

On February 16, 2007, my dream became true. I won the Miss Deaf CSUN 2007-2009 crown as the first international Japanese winner. I won the platform speech and evening gown sections, and received scholarships. This was my proudest moment because I was able to express my sincere thanks to my parents, Ms. Whitestone, and the late Ms. Takamura. My success in this experience took nearly 10 years from when my first dream was born on May 1, 1997.

### **Expanding My Deaf Identity**

After I won the 2007 Miss Deaf CSUN Pageant, I became actively involved in student activities at CSUN. I was involved as the 2009 Miss Deaf CSUN Pageant Chair, I worked as an NCOD orientation leader in 2009, and I also assisted deaf students in classes as a teaching assistant. As a representative of CSUN, I was selected as a Presidential Scholar for two years, and I received 10 scholarships during my four years of study.

As a student, I majored in Deaf Studies. I studied ASL grammar structure, Deaf and hearing culture, Deaf history, Deaf literature, and Deaf law from deaf professors and leaders from the American Deaf community. These experiences helped me to come out from hiding my talents to develop my Deaf identity and increase my self-esteem.

### **At a Turning Point in My Life, the University of Southern California**

In January 2010, my senior year, I had just come back from my community service in Jamaica, and I was preparing applications for graduate school in social work. I went to meet my Deaf mentor, Dr. Barbara Boyd, at her office, to ask her for a recommendation

letter. I planned to apply to a university which had a large deaf student population, as I was anxious about studying alone at a university that had few deaf students.

When I met her, Dr. Boyd's eyes became full of tears. She shook her head and said "You must apply to the top-ranking social work graduate program. Please do not limit your capability. Otherwise, you will waste your time!"

Dr. Boyd strongly recommended that I apply to the University of Southern California (USC). When I first called the admission office for the application questions, to my surprise, the staff member responded to my call had the middle name Mariko. It reminded me of the late Ms. Mariko Takamura who assisted me in applying to CSUN. One month later, I received an acceptance letter from the USC. Dr. Boyd was so excited at the news and said,

"I know you can do it. I graduated from the USC Rossier School of Education with my Ph.D. degree in 1983. At that time, there was no law to advocate for deaf rights, so I had to pay for both tuition and interpreters out of my own pocket. It took 20 years to pay back all of my interpreter fees. Today, you do not have to worry about it thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. I never regret that I earned my doctoral degree from USC. I met a great mentor who has changed my life."

The direction of my life was turning 180 degrees. A half year after my admission at USC, Dr. Boyd passed away on Valentine's Day, 2011.

### **A New Vision: Captioned Jumbotrons at Commencement**

When I entered USC in the fall semester of 2010, I was the only international deaf student. USC had very few deaf and hard-of-hearing students, but had a large number of international students. It was more of a challenge being a deaf student than being an international student.

I stood and looked around campus, muttering to myself, "My parents have supported me to achieve my dream. What can I contribute to USC while I am here?"

On May 13, 2011, I attended a commencement ceremony. There were many families from other countries. The disabled seating section was full, and many wheelchairs users, English as Second Language (ESL) individuals, and senior citizens stood watching the event with their family members, looking at the Jumbotrons rather than being located in the disabled seating section. My family members are ESL individuals, my brother is deaf, and I have both deaf and hearing ESL friends.

The sight brought me a new vision: It would be a wonderful moment when all of our family and friends could enjoy watching their students' faces on captioned Jumbotrons without any limitations such as sitting separately from their family members.

After that, I started to investigate other universities' accessibility issues related to captioned televisions, online videos and Jumbotrons. I was involved in several discussions and proposals for accessibility at the USC campus regarding the use of universally captioned televisions. I conducted an independent research study to measure the American, international, deaf and hard-of-hearing students' total values toward captioned online classes at two universities. I found that not only deaf and hard-of-hearing students, but also international and American students, would be willing to pay for captioned online classes with additional fees in order to receive better learning opportunities. The total values of captioned online classes were estimated to be \$2,000,000 per year (Yabe, 2015a; 2015b).

I recalled the late Dr. Boyd's message to me, "I know you can do it." I breathed deeply and I wrote a proposal letter to the commencement committee, stating that the Jumbotrons at USC's 130th Commencement should have captions added to them. On May 17, 2013, my vision came true.

### **At the 130th Commencement**

During the commencement celebration week, I was selected for the 2013 USC Student Recognition Award, the 2013 Dean's Award for Excellence & Innovation Award, and for the Phi Alpha Social Work Honor Society. I was also selected to present as the 2013 Social Work Grad Night Gala speaker. My family members and my friends visited me to celebrate. There were also many family members of

international students and senior citizens. I stood in line and watched the captioned Jumbotrons. I looked up into the blue sky, where Dr. Boyd was in heaven.

My eyes were full of tears. I was fraught with great emotion.

### **In Closing**

Recently, I again read my mother's book, "We Can Hear Atlanta's Wind" (Yabe, 2000). My mother had kept her records from our births through our school life at an international school for Japanese students in Atlanta, Georgia in 1995. At the time, my brother was a fourth grader and I was a second grader in elementary school. My mother was inspired to see how our personalities had borne fruit, making our Deafness become our uniqueness. After returning to Japan in 1997, my mother wanted to share her experiences with everyone through her book – her thoughts for Japanese deaf children, her inspiration in Atlanta, and the reality of the barriers in Japan (Yabe, 2000).

With happy memories, I realized that my parents, filled with their faith, had raised my brother and me and brought out my personality and gifts. The messages of "Hope," "Dream," "Courage," "Forward," and "Challenge" are now a part of my body and blood. My parents' words and the Bible's scriptures have been unconsciously etched into my heart deeply.

I would like to share one of my favorite stories, the Parable of Talents (Matthew 25:14-30 New International Version). The story is about three servants and their master. To summarize:

Before the master went to travel, he left his profits to his three servants: five talents for a servant, two talents for another servant, and one talent for the last servant. After the master left, the servant who had received five talents went to work and gained more than five talents. The other servant who had received two talents went to work and gained more than two talents. The last servant who had received one talent did not use it, and hid it in the earth instead. When the master returned, he was pleased to hear that the two servants had used their talents and had earned more than the five and two talents that were given to them by the master. But the master was disappointed

to hear that the last servant never used even the one talent for any benefit (Matthew 25:14-30 New International Version).

There are different translations and views regarding the meaning of the Parable of Talents. From my perspective, the talents in this story stand for abilities. The master was happy to see that the two servants took the opportunity to use their abilities for benefit, but the master was upset to see that the last servant missed an opportunity to use his ability that he was offered.

Since my early childhood, my parents have encouraged me to use my talents gifted from God. When I was a child, I was not sure if I fully understood, but today, looking back on my life, when I used my gifted talents for my benefit or if I never used my gifted talents at all, my harvest was small. But when I decided to use my gifted talents to contribute to others, I received an uncountable harvest. I could not ignore the fact that there was an enormous difference in the result between when I used my gifted talents for myself and when I used them for the benefit of others.

Here, from my deep heart, I would like to offer my sincere appreciation to my parents who spent so much time and effort to seek and obtain better Deaf education for my brother and me. I am indebted to my family who has raised my tiny seed of a desire to be a real social worker into blossoming colorful gardens in my life.

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