



# A Life Well Lived

By Brandi Goode

**At 72 years old, Atsuko Toko Fish's river of accomplishments runs deep and wide. Still, she says this is the best time of her life.**

Fish is a retired US–Japan cross-cultural consultant, a board member of the U.S.–Japan Council, founder of the Japanese Women's Leadership Initiative (JWLI) . . . and the list goes on. A first-generation American, her life as a global citizen began in a place familiar to many readers of *The Journal*: the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan (ACCJ).

Heeding her family's advice to learn English and experience life outside Japan, Fish took a job as executive assistant at the ACCJ office.

"I knew nothing about the American business world," Fish relates. "But people were so generous, even though I made mistakes every day. That's the best thing about

Americans: they accept mistakes, and as long as you learn from those errors, Americans embrace and praise you. This is a key difference compared with Japan. This is also why innovation lags in Japan."

## FELLOW FEMALES

Fish is a devoted advocate of women's issues. In 2006, she founded the JWLI to help entrepreneurially minded Japanese women go to the United States and learn directly—from successful nonprofit organizations and social enterprises—how to become leaders. As a trustee of the Fish Family Foundation, Fish has relatable experience in the so-called third sector (nonprofits).

While she expresses disappointment that the Japanese government has reduced its 2020 target for women in managerial roles to 7 percent from the previous 30 percent, she admits to seeing tremendous change in her native Japan. "I was part of the generation

that helped rebuild the country after the war. People forget how hard that was," she notes.

In Japan, she has seen social innovation emerge slowly but surely. This she finds incredibly interesting, noting that "Japan never had a third sector before the March 11 disasters. Now, people are not entirely dependent on the government; rather, they are taking the initiative to help others," Fish says.

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When she launched the JWLI program a decade ago, she struggled to recruit fellows to attend the weeks-long US initiative. Last year, however, more than 40 people applied for just four positions.

"Japanese women are smart, educated, and hardworking; but they are not expected to play



a [leadership] role in society. At school they need to teach women leadership skills, such as public speaking,” she believes.

A mom of three, Fish points to the critical role a mother plays within a family.

“Children always look to their mother, to see what role she plays and how father treats her. Women must believe in themselves and their ability to make a difference. In particular, Japan needs to teach women the value of learning English, going abroad, and seeing the world,” she says.

Fish was raised by a single mother who set a strong example for her to follow. “She was a mother, father, business consultant, and my best buddy,” Fish shares.

### SPEAK UP

Her husband, Larry, has also provided valuable business insight over the course of her career. After moving to the United States, Atsuko Fish took a job with the state government, and Larry sagely advised her to speak up and own her opinions. On her first day at work, she actually got pulled aside after an important meeting—because she hadn’t said anything! “This was my

first business lesson in America,” she says.

Fish’s career progressed with her involvement in several public and private organizations, supporting immigrants, the arts, global health initiatives, and disaster victims, in addition to her efforts to advance

**Last year, more than 40 people applied for just four positions [with JWLI].**

women’s role in society. Besides her board seat with the U.S.–Japan Council, she has served over 10 years on the board of the Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence (ATASK), as well as The Japan Society of New York, Management Sciences for Health, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, among others.

When taking on a board-level role, she listens carefully to the organization’s needs and considers how she can make a difference as a board member.

“I believe that at my age, giving back is my responsibility,” she explains.

Her first board role was with ATASK, which she describes as a life-changing experience. She chaired the group for 10 years, during which time she “learned and cried a lot.” She relates how in Japan, it is taboo to talk about domestic violence, whereas ATASK encourages women to speak out on such topics, to educate and support other potential victims.

Fish also experienced great joy and overwhelming emotion serving on the board of organizations, such as Management Sciences for Health, building public health systems in developing countries. This was likewise an eye-opening experience, she says, as Japan residents are rarely exposed to environments lacking in reliable access to health care.

As a result of her work, Fish has received numerous awards over the years, both in Japan and the United

States. Most recently, in September 2012, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs awarded her the Foreign Minister’s Commendation.

In May 2013, the White House named Fish a recipient of the Asian American Pacific Islander women “Champion of Change” award, an accolade that is part of President Barack Obama’s “Winning the Future” initiative.

“I wanted to work for Obama, so that award was so meaningful.

I am nobody in America, but it is such an open, inclusive, encouraging place. I am so lucky to be here.

America gave me opportunity. This is still the country where dreams come true,” she shares.

### CREATE YOUR LEGACY

Nowadays, Fish is “retired,” but still works with the JWLI program as well as the Fish Family Foundation. Together with her husband, they established the foundation to support human service organizations helping low-income working families, with a particular emphasis on aiding immigrants. In 2015, the group helped some 4,000 Green Card holders become US citizens. The foundation also supports a Japan program at the Boys and Girls Club of Boston, for which inner-city children take a year of Japanese culture and language lessons and are sent to Japan as a reward for hard work.

When asked her thoughts on leaving a legacy, she humbly retorts that the people of Tohoku—who she supported by creating a relief fund in the aftermath of the 2011 triple disaster—are much stronger than she.

“You create your own legacy, and it is not just top-down. Every woman can create her own legacy by believing she can make a difference. My message to the younger generation is this: go out and see the world, let things touch your heart. Learn how to give back to society and the community.” ■