

The path to Stanford

I grew up in Japan and came to the U.S. in my twenties to pursue higher education. I studied early childhood development and education, earning an MEd and a Montessori teaching credential, and worked at several preschools, including Escondido Village Nursery School (which no longer exists), the Children's Center of the Stanford Community, and Bing Nursery School. While involved in research projects at the Stanford School of Education, I developed a deep interest in educational research. This path eventually led me to the Social Science in Education (SSE) program, where I could investigate topics that fascinated me using interdisciplinary approaches.

The GSE's impact on career and life

My time at Stanford instilled in me a lifelong curiosity and intrinsic motivation to keep learning and growing. I often look back nostalgically on those years in such an intellectually stimulating environment, surrounded by inspiring professors and students—it was truly one of the best times in my life. I received my PhD in 1997, just a couple of months before my son was born.

After Stanford, I worked part-time at the University of Washington as a research assistant and tried to turn my dissertation into a book when an academic press expressed interest. However, the demands of early motherhood made it impossible to complete the manuscript. Missing that opportunity was a disappointment that lingered for a long time. Motherhood brought its own challenges, including struggles with anxiety and depression. But in my late forties, attending a weeklong writing retreat in British Columbia sparked a shift in me. I became passionate about creative writing, enrolling in classes, retreats, and residencies, which eventually led to my desire to work on a book-length project.

Influential mentors and leaders

The lifelong learning, curiosity, and motivation I developed at Stanford have continued to guide me. Dr. David Tyack was one of the most wonderful human beings and mentors I've ever met. I adored and respected him not only for his excellence as a professor but also for his kindness and integrity as a person. I'm also grateful to Chiqui Ramirez and Harumi Befu, who supported me throughout my studies and dissertation writing.

Key memories, pivotal moments, and reflections

One of the most significant events that shaped my life was spending a month with my American host family in Napa as a teenager. This one-month stay changed the entire trajectory of my life—I truly wouldn't be where I am today without them. All of them were also Stanford graduates, and they were the ones who first introduced me to the university. It is no exaggeration to say that their support and encouragement were the biggest influences on my decision to attend Stanford.

Advice for alumni peers and aspiring GSE students

I feel a bit sheepish offering advice, but if I were to share anything, it would be to stay true to yourself and not to be afraid to share your vulnerabilities and struggles. Approach everything you do with honesty, kindness, authenticity, and gratitude. In my experience, these qualities have helped me navigate both challenges and opportunities. They have also been essential in making genuine connections and building a compassionate community of caring, like-minded people.

To connect with Shigeko or learn more about her book, visit shigekoito.com