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NSU International Student Overcomes Setbacks To Graduate with Honors

Northeastern State University student Michiko Saiki has all the trappings of a model undergraduate.

A music performance major and decorated pianist, she carries a 4.0 cumulative grade-point average, is a recipient both of NSU's Stroup Endowed Music Scholarship and an Academic Achievement Award in 2009, and will graduate summa cum laude this spring.

The road to this impressive academic journey was not straightforward or easy. Like many college students, Saiki faced doubt along the way.

"Going from depressed to being a successful student and person was a gradual change," Saiki said. "It didn't happen overnight and it is hard to say 'this changed me' or 'that was it.' And it probably wasn't until everything happened that I realized I'd changed. You often don't see the meaning or effect of something until long after it has happened."

For Saiki, home is in Japan. When she left the bustling metropolis of Saitama Prefecture for the small U.S. town of Tahlequah, she found the initial experience overwhelming.

"I didn't understand the culture," she said. "I didn't speak English well. It's tough for someone whose first language is Japanese to learn English, and the other way around. I actually find English grammar simple, but English and Japanese words are put in sentences in completely different order. As a freshman, I said, 'uh' a lot."

Overcoming those challenges, so far away from home and family, with the added hurdle of a language barrier, Saiki did not just muddle through; she rose to the occasion and soared to success.

There was a time when Saiki, 23, didn't want to attend college. She didn't want to play classical music, or the piano, which she had done since age 3. She was playing guitar and bass and singing for a rock band, getting a couple of gigs a month, and enjoying it.

"Virtually all music study in Japan is classical and I didn't want to do that," she said. "Much of it is conservatories demanding a high level of skill just to be accepted. Me, I was just singing and writing songs for fun."

But one day before a concert, Saiki's father showed her an advertisement for an institute that introduces Japanese students to U.S. universities.

"My father said I should have a good educational foundation – that I shouldn't just write music without knowing anything," she said.

She chose to attend NSU and wanted to major in voice. The normally outgoing Saiki became shy because of the language barrier and ran into immediate problems. She didn't realize NSU did not offer a jazz voice major, and she took courses



Michiko Saiki at the piano, her instrument of mastery.

from which she could easily have tested out.

"I was taking a group piano class – five-finger patterns and stuff," she said. "It was Dr. (Ronald) Chioldi who noticed me, asked how long I'd been playing and started giving me more difficult, advanced music to play."

Chioldi arranged for Saiki to sight read for some of his students, and she was also playing accompaniment for some of the singers on campus.

However, she really hoped to prepare for her own singing career. Toward the end of her first semester, she gave a classical voice performance before an audience.

"I cried afterward," she said. "I sang OK, but I was so uncomfortable singing classical music. It just wasn't fun."

Saiki then questioned the direction of her education. Chioldi, seeing her potential, suggested she utilize her musical background and focus on the piano, offering to secure her a scholarship. Another recommending classical piano was Mari Kumagai.

Kumagai, a 2009 NSU graduate, was a gifted pianist. At the Student Creativity Showcase in April 2009, Kumagai, Saiki and Tatsuo Kohjima sat together at a piano and performed Kumagai's six-hand arrangement of the Radetzky March by Johann Strauss I.

"I watched her play when I first got to NSU," Saiki said. "I thought only words could effectively express emotions to people, but she talked through the music. I was so impressed by that. And, it was flattering that someone I respected so much thought I could become a good piano player."

While the praise did not entirely squelch her doubts, Saiki gradually immersed herself in the educational opportunities and enrichments available through Northeastern.

Between 2009 and 2010, Saiki won both the junior-senior division of the Oklahoma Music Teachers Association's Collegiate Piano Competition and the NSU Concerto Competition, and was a finalist in the Delta Symphony Orchestra Concerto Competition.

In addition to her studies, Saiki has been active in extra-curricular activities including attending the Brevard Music Institute festival, also being invited to the Chautauqua summer music festival. She is a member of Japan NSU and the Alpha Chi national collegiate honor society, and has given several solo performances, including during the Brown Bag It concert series at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center.

Though there were some bumps along the way, Saiki prefers the U.S. university system to that of Japan, saying she enjoyed much more curricular flexibility.

"In Japan, just to get in you have to take a very difficult test and when you decide on a major you stick with it," she said. "Even if you aren't sure yet about what you want to do, you have to decide – at 18. At most American universities you have time to find yourself. You can just take one class if you want. In Japan you pay for the full year, and you follow the set curriculum of your major. It is very rigid with few electives."

Overall, Saiki calls her time at NSU a good experience. After graduation, she will attend graduate school at Bowling Green State University. She has yet to decide, but might make her career in the U.S.

"I think this five years was a transition," she said. "I really think I almost became a completely new person. I found myself again. I'm so thankful to my faculty members, especially Dr. Chioldi. He supported me through all my years here and guided me in this direction."

Read more on [Spring 2011 Commencement Ceremonies](#).

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