

Embracing the bicultural identity

Growing up in Japan, blue-eyed American Leslie Lorimer never saw herself as a 'gaijin'

By BARBARA BAYER

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Leslie Lorimer defied definition in Japan from the time she was a young child, when her blond hair, blue eyes and fluent Japanese proved a startling mix.

She and her brother would enjoy going to the imported-foods shop in Yokohama, where they would point to non-Japanese and exclaim, "Oh, look at the *gaijin!*" Back then, Lorimer found nothing odd about their pastime. She says, "We never thought we were *gaijin*, we were Japanese."



Leslie Lorimer at her office in Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture. BARBARA BAYER PHOTO

Despite what Lorimer thought as a girl, in terms of citizenship, she was not Japanese. She was born in Oregon to American parents, but lived in Japan from 1964, when she was 2. Then, after two years back in the United States, she went to Japanese elementary school, where she and her brother were the only non-Japanese students. She grew up virtually no differently from any Japanese child.

"I didn't like it when my parents came to school," she remembers, "because then the kids would look at me and say, "Oh, yeah, she *is* a *gaijin*, isn't she?" If my parents came to school for Sports Day or anything, I refused to speak English to them and just kind of ignored them and pretended they weren't there. I wanted to be Japanese, I guess. I didn't like being different."

It wasn't until junior high school, when, to her chagrin, her parents entered her in international school, that Lorimer had to begin to face and acquaint herself with her relatively latent multicultural background as well as with her burgeoning identity issues. "I didn't want to be there," she says of the school that was turning her world upside down.

She deals with identity issues or their prevention by helping young people maintain and/or develop their language skills and is also advising hundreds of parents on how to give their children the best of both worlds.

From a family where both parents were teachers, Lorimer swore as a child that she would "never become a teacher." After working with her brother at his software company for about eight years, Lorimer found her way into education, teaching and counseling at Yokohama International School, where she also met her husband, a British physics teacher. There, Lorimer discovered that she "just loved teaching."

International Academic Consultants, Lorimer's consulting service and school in Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture, was launched two years ago to help provide answers to the many questions parents have regarding education options in and outside Japan. The parents may be, like her own were, both non-Japanese but raising children in Japan, or they may be parents in a multicultural marriage, or they may be both Japanese but have spent years abroad with their children. Now they find themselves back in Japan with children ("returnees") who no longer fit the mold and who may be feeling miserable as a result.

Parents are often at a loss as to what their options are, Lorimer says. Many cannot afford the ¥2-million-a-year fees for international schools, but want their children to benefit from being bilingual. "A lot of them don't especially like the Japanese system, cramming for the entrance exam and having to go to *juku* (cram schools) in addition to school.

"They think it's OK when the kids are small because they're bicultural and they want them to have that foundation in Japanese, but they don't want them to be just Japanese," she says. "They want to give their children a choice when they're old enough to decide if they want to become American or British or Japanese or where they want to live the rest of their lives."

On the other hand, spending no time in Japanese schools has its own problems. Lorimer, whose own children have only attended international school, admits she regrets the decision in that, though "they are very happy and very well-adjusted," they will never have the Japanese foundation that going to Japanese elementary school would have given them.

"I used to blame my parents for sending me to a Japanese school, because it was really hard when I started at the international school. Now, I am very grateful that they did that."

Parents, she says, also need to realize that children from multicultural marriages where one of the parents is a native English speaker often can speak English seemingly fluently but have little actual academic ability in the language. The children are often unable to read or write and would find it extremely difficult to keep up were they to study abroad. Lorimer, despite both her parents being native English speakers, was able to speak English but tested at the first-grade level when she entered international school in the seventh grade.

Lorimer herself spent three years studying at an American university before she returned to Japan and eventually earned her master's degree and counseling credentials through correspondence and training programs here. The initial stay abroad, however, was difficult. She missed her Japanese self. "My friends weren't interested in Japan. They didn't even know where it was. They thought it was part of China."

Her business also provides consulting and search services for those wishing to attend university abroad or the more affordable short-term language courses outside Japan. She strives to find the best match between students and schools.

Though her focus is youth, Lorimer works with all age groups. She recently escorted a group of "mature students" in their 70s to England for a two-week language and cultural home-stay program.

In Kamakura, Lorimer, along with her sister-in-law and other staff members, teach some 80 students. Classes are divided by age group and level and taught using topics and textbooks such as those that would be used in classes in the U.S. or Britain. Children are expected to only use English while in the

school. Classes are held once a week and students are "given a lot of homework."

"We see a huge difference with the kids that actually work with their parents at home and those that don't. It's obvious which parents aren't helping," Lorimer says. "So we make it very clear to the parents that if you start this class we'll do as much as we can in class for the hour and a half and we'll give as much homework and support and we'll provide you with Web sites and books and workbooks and whatever you can use at home, but it is still important that the child gets support at home."

Usually, it's the mothers who are working with the children, but in the case where that is not possible and where the English-speaking parent is the working father (the more common scenario in Japan), Lorimer sometimes has to get tough. "We'll actually get the dad to come in and say 'your kid's not going to learn English unless you can spend time with him.' Some of them try and others just give up and those kids are the ones that are weaker."

Returnees are in a slightly different situation. "Quite a few of them are just miserable back in Japanese school but the parents can't afford international schools," Lorimer says. "The parents obviously want them to keep up their English because they've spent three to four years overseas studying it and they sound like native English speakers."

Unfortunately, these children often have another disadvantage. "Usually they don't have the support at home because both parents are Japanese, so we try to help them improve or at least help keep the level they attained while living overseas."

For Lorimer, who spent 11 years in three different counseling and teaching positions at Yokohama International School before setting off on her own, helping returnees and other bicultural children realize they have options beyond Japan is an important aspect of her work.

Naturally, studying abroad will often open doors because of the benefits of true bilingualism. For those whose parents are able to shoulder the \$50,000 annual tuition fees for universities for four years, the business opportunities and connections, Lorimer believes, will prove invaluable.

Lorimer also feels certain options should be extended to children from bicultural families simply because it's their birthright. "For the kids' sake," she says, "and this is talking as a mother with two children that are looking at American universities right now. I just think they should be given the chance to experience something other than Japan. . . . I don't think it is fair to them to say 'Sorry, you can't live there because we can't afford it.' They need to get to know their family, their cousins, and have that identity."

There is another very valuable aspect to the work Lorimer is doing. She helps kids feel at home, no matter what their background. Her school is "someplace where they can come and relax and just be themselves. They're not different when they're here because everyone is sort of different, which makes them normal when they're here," she points out.

"A couple of them, especially the older girls I think, are more comfortable in English and around foreigners than they are being in a Japanese school. There they have to act a certain way because they're girls and there are certain expectations. They're not allowed to speak up in class. They're not allowed to express any opinion.

"They can come here and just be normal," she says, "and we joke with them and we talk about boys. And, it's all in English so it's helping, but I don't think it's just the language."

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