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My Path from Hiroshima to Houston

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How did I, a Japanese woman raised in Hiroshima, come to be a professor of radiation oncology at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston? My decision to become a cancer investigator and physician was made very early in my life, through my experiences with my family in Japan and with one of my best friends, Sadako Sasaki, who died of acute granulocytic leukemia at the age of 11 after exposure to atomic bomb radiation.

My father was working at Hanshin, a highly prestigious company in Osaka, on August 6, 1945, when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima at 8:15 am. The following day, he went to Hiroshima, where he was exposed to “black rain” containing high doses of radiation, to look for members of his and my mother’s family. Although we lost many relatives, and others became very ill from the radiation effects, some managed to survive the exposure. If we had been in Hiroshima at the time, none of us would have lived on.

I met my friend Sadako Sasaki in the Nobori-Cho Elementary School in Hiroshima when we were both 10 years old and in the fifth grade. Although Sadako and I were the same age, we were in different classes, and we competed in running events in the fall athletic meeting. Sadako was very fast, and I had a hard time keeping up with her.

Sadako had been exposed to radiation from the atomic bomb when she was 2 years old. She eventually developed shortness of breath and anemia and was diagnosed with leukemia when she was 10 years old. She was hospitalized and died of leukemia 9 months after her diagnosis.

While Sadako was hospitalized, she attempted to fold 1,000 origami cranes. In Japan, the crane is a symbol of longevity and happiness. It is said that if you can fold 1,000 cranes, you can recover from illness. So Sadako would take her medication, which came wrapped in waxed paper, and then fold her origami cranes from that paper. Sadako wanted to live! However, despite prayers from her family, and help from her friends to fold cranes, she passed away at the age of 11.

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When Sadako died, my classmates wanted to do something for her but had little idea of what it could be. But I was so touched by her death, and I thought, “We should never forget what she had to go through.” By that time I had seen so many children who had lost their parents, their siblings, and their homes. I felt very blessed to still have my parents, and my sisters and my brother. At the time, I remembered thinking I wanted to make sure that people did not forget Sadako, and that they never forget this horrible disaster, how dropping an atomic bomb killed so many people.

Two years after her death, I became the student president of the Nobori-Cho Junior High School, where Sadako had registered to enter but never got to attend. I had begun corresponding with Sadako’s older brother, and he and I started making plans to build a memorial statue for her. We wrote many letters to deans of schools in Japan asking for contributions in her memory. We decided to go out on the streets and collect donations from Hiroshima’s citizens. Even though everyone at the time was struggling to survive—no one had enough food, no one had enough room to live, many were living in shacks—people were still so touched and they donated money even though everyone had so little. It is still amazing to me that within 2 years, we—just children ourselves—had collected enough to build the statue.

We also engaged a young man, Mr. Kawamoto, to help us gather a public educational film-making group to create “Sadako’s Story,” which later became a hit film, “One Thousand Cranes,” that was shown in many movie theaters. Within 2 years, we had collected sufficient funds to hire an architect to create a statue, “Atomic Bomb Children,” to commemorate Sadako and the thousands of other child victims of the atomic bombing. This 10-foot statue is located in the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, at the epicenter where the bomb had been dropped. Sadako still stands atop a stylized bomb shell, holding a large crane in her upraised arms, to pray for world peace.

Following my parents’ exhortations to focus on my education and look to the future, I began thinking about college and medical school. I was intrigued by the effects of atomic bomb radiation on people, since my grandmother had been in Hiroshima when the bomb was dropped. In fact, her house had collapsed due to the suction effects from the bomb. She had been trapped underneath her house but was rescued from the ruins and taken outside of the city. In the next few months, she experienced every side effect of total-body radiation (e.g., hair loss, severe diarrhea, anorexia, and bone marrow suppression). However, she recovered from these effects and lived a nearly normal life without developing leukemia or any malignancy, succumbing to Alzheimer disease and osteoporosis at the age of 72. Why did my grandmother, who had been exposed to total body radiation in Hiroshima, never develop leukemia, but Sadako was not spared? Why were some people susceptible to radiation, and some less so?

This curiosity – aroused in a unique historical context – has been the catalyst for my entry into a profession that revolves around the use of radiation to treat patients with cancer, my pursuit of a career predicated on posing radiobiological questions and my mission which is based on the need to right a wrong.

Figure 1.
Ritsuko and Sadako, running mates

Figure 2.
Ritsuko Komaki standing in front of the Atomic Bomb Children statue, or Children's Peace Monument, in Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, in 1980