



Learning to Leave a Legacy

MSU-TRAINED SCHOLAR COMES FULL CIRCLE FROM HER LOVE STORY, LOSS TO SUPPORT FUTURE SPARTANS

BY NICOLE GEARY

When Okhee Lee-Salwen decided to pursue her doctorate at Michigan State University, she didn't realize she was joining the team that would become known for setting a new national research agenda on teaching, or that the course of her own life—career, marriage—would be forever stamped by her experiences on campus.

Now, after 30 years, rising to the top of the education field and falling to the depths of heartbreaking loss, she not only fully understands the impact, but *she is saying thank you in an extraordinary way.*

A SCHOLAR'S LIFE

As the youngest of seven children growing up in rural South Korea, Okhee didn't always have enough to eat. But she was fortunate to have a good education. When she finished her master's degree at Kyungpook National University, her father thought it was time to get married. Okhee thought it was time to get a Ph.D. They made a deal: she could go to the United States to study if she received funding.

It was 1983. Education research funding was limited, so she was surprised when she received a call from Andrew Porter, co-director at the time (with the late Jere Brophy) of the Institute for Research on Teaching (IRT) in the College of Education at MSU. He offered her a research intern position with three years of guaranteed funding. She accepted.

"I was one of the few foreign students. Everyone said, 'We tease you because we like you,' so I said, 'stop liking me,'" Okhee jokes. "Everyone was so kind to me. I had such an amazing training."

The IRT received significant federal funding and gathered many of the intellectuals committed to research on teachers and effective teaching, a major shift for education research that until then had largely focused only on students and the learning process.

"It was the beginning of a new research agenda with the best minds at the time—really nice people, who were at the top of their game," Okhee says.

She met Michael Salwen at her dormitory, Owen Hall. He was a doctoral student in communication who was popular among international students for providing rides to the grocery store, helping write papers and generally watching out for others.

Okhee kept her romance secret from her conservative family back home until the day she told them she and Michael were getting married. They had a civil service and a potluck reception at the MSU Museum, right in front of the dinosaur skeleton.

Michael received his Ph.D. in mass media in 1985 from the College of Communication Arts and Sciences and got a job on the faculty at the University of Miami in Florida. Okhee joined him there once she completed her Ph.D. in educational psychology, with research

training in science education, in 1989. Her dissertation director was Charles "Andy" Anderson, now one of the nation's leading experts on science education and still a professor at MSU.

Okhee thrived at Miami, where she was a faculty member for more than 20 years. Relying on the cutting-edge research training she received at MSU, she built a career focusing on diversity and equity issues in science education. In 2004, she received the Distinguished Career Award from the American Educational Research Association's Standing Committee for Scholars of Color in Education.

"My life revolved around my research, my teaching and my husband," Okhee has said. "And I was so happy."



FROM GRIEVING TO GIVING

Okhee lost Michael when he was just 53 years old.

He suffered from cancer for more than six years. Even while the couple juggled chemo treatments and professional commitments, they made time to talk about how they would like to share their financial assets. They decided to include Miami and MSU in their estate plans.

"We thought it would be most appropriate to give back to MSU where we met and studied," she said. "Michigan State was very good to both of us. Otherwise, we would not have existed."

But in her grief, Okhee said it took time to think about how she would leave not only her legacy, but Michael's. She has decided not to wait until after her own life to see the fruits of their generosity.

"If I can do good while I am alive, then I can give the memory of Michael's name. I can do it for him," she said.

Okhee set up a planned as well as an expendable gift at Miami so that graduate students there could begin receiving scholarships almost immediately. And now she is doing the same for her alma mater.

Her gifts to MSU are being split equally between the College of Education and the College of Communication Arts and Sciences and will provide financial support to students. Her wish is for each college to start awarding scholarships as soon as her endowments reach the minimum level (\$50,000). She has also promised a planned gift.

THE REWARDS OF LEGACY

It's a new stage in Okhee's life.

She is the go-to expert on diversity and equity in K-12 science. She recently chaired a committee working to ensure the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), now being implemented in states across the nation, meet the needs of diverse student groups. She was also a member of the Understanding Language Initiative at Stanford University to address learning opportunities and challenges that the Common Core and NGSS present to all students, especially English language learners.

"I strive to make a difference, to leave a legacy: through scholarship, through education, through giving and through kindness to the people around me," she told the students of New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development, where she is now on the faculty, during her 2014 commencement address (see photo).

She is striving, more than ever, to give her time, talent and resources. "The more I share those things, the more that I am learning how priceless they are," she said.

And she encourages other Spartans to do the same.

"For those who can afford it, I hope they will think about giving back. It's such an emotional and spiritual experience."