



# STRIVING FOR THE COMPETITIVE Edge

By Shawnda Schelinder  
Photos by Dale Thomas

For two sisters with dreams of setting themselves apart from other job candidates in Japan, traveling thousands of miles to Wisconsin has given them the professional advantage they need.

Globally, the job market is daunting. Every skill, every experience can mean the winning edge for job seekers.

Shunka and Waka Sakuda had seen how their aunt Miho had set herself apart from other job candidates in Okinawa, Japan. Miho had something other job seekers didn't – an education and three years of life experience in America. So in February 2008, Shunka and Waka followed in Miho's footsteps and traveled from the small island of Okinawa to the frozen landscape of Ashland, Wis.

Like their aunt Miho, the Sakuda sisters first attended Ashland High School and went on to Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College to finish their American education.

"She came here in 1990 and she was in the office support program," Shunka, 20, says of Miho. "After she finished, she went back to Okinawa, and she got job at a military base, which is a good job in Okinawa. Okinawa is a small island and you cannot really find jobs easily."

Miho's diploma from WITC and her immersion in the English language gave her the edge when it came to pursuing a career as an office professional in Okinawa. Shunka and Waka are following in her footsteps, hoping to return to Okinawa this winter with the same advantage.

"We were very impressed by her," Shunka continued. "She was always speaking English and we were like 'She is so cool.' Therefore, we wanted to come and wanted to learn English."

They had family ties in both Wisconsin and California, but chose to call Ashland home for almost three years.

"We could go to California," explains Waka, 19. "But is way too big, and there are too many Japanese. So we wouldn't learn English there."

In Japan, students learn English in grade school, but it's primarily writing and reading. Before coming to America, the sisters barely spoke any English at all. Certainly, it would have been more comfortable to stay in a community that spoke Japanese as well as English. But Shunka and Waka knew they would have to fully immerse themselves in an English speaking culture in order to become as fluent as possible.

"We can learn English in Japan, but then it's not the same English," Waka explains. "We learn from Japanese people or Americans who can speak Japanese. So it's different between learning in Japan and learning in America."

Their great aunt Veronica BeBeau, who they affectionately call grandma, welcomed them into her Ashland home, introducing the sisters to a whole

new branch of the family tree. BeBeau and the sisters spoke Japanese to begin with, but they switched to an "English only" policy after Shunka and Waka picked up enough of the language to be able to communicate.

The differences in the academic structure have also helped. Shunka and Waka have found their American teachers at AHS and WITC to be much more approachable.

"I think here it is more friendly," Shunka says. "We can ask questions easily. You don't have to hesitate."

Both women have appreciated having an academic advisor like WITC instructor Sharon Duthie on their side. Small class sizes with like-minded peers have also been a benefit. And of course, the cost of attending WITC versus other regional colleges weighed heavily.

"It's cheaper here," Waka says. "In Japan, everything is really expensive, and I think there would be bigger classes if we went to college in Japan."

Being in a small community has also helped them immerse themselves in the North Woods culture. Berry picking, apple picking, hunting, skiing and snowboarding are just a sampling of the activities they've been able to try in Wisconsin that aren't available to them in Okinawa. The temperate island climate had never introduced the sisters to snow, apple trees and Midwest wildlife.

"When I came here, it was snowing, and I was like, 'This is so cool!'" Shunka says. "I didn't have any gloves, but I just had to touch the snow and it was so cold!"



Watch Shunka and Waka perform the Taiko dance. Go to [youtube.com/user/WITCollege4You](https://youtube.com/user/WITCollege4You)

"Okinawa is so little and we don't have any of the animals that are here," Shunka continues. "We only see in Okinawa birds, dogs and cats. In here, there is deer, skunk, squirrels and everything. It was maybe two weeks ago I saw a skunk for the first time. It was exciting!"

The Sakudas have also shared their culture, Duthie says. "In Administrative Office Procedure class, we talk about culture differences. That was very interesting because they could share the real world culture of how we are different. We talked about formality between ages, instructors and parents and all that. Students loved it," Duthie says.

Shunka and Waka have also shared a traditional dance from Okinawa called Taiko.

"It is drum dance, but not like Native American's dance. We have this drum, carry on our shoulder and we dance and drum at the same time," says Shunka. "It's our traditional culture. But our team created more stuff that is new. Modern stuff. So it's more interesting."

"We put this traditional Taiko dance and add Karate and more traditional Japanese dances. We mix and we create new dances," Waka explains.

They've also incorporated modern music, including Western pop like Michael Jackson, and performed with the high school band at half time. They've performed for the Elks, at Bay Days, at a local restaurant's sushi night and at WITC as well.

Performing the Taiko and cooking Japanese food for their American family has helped keep the women connected to their roots, which they feel is important because they haven't been able to return home since they arrived in Ashland in 2008. They worked hard to complete their two-year degree program in only three semesters so that they could return to Okinawa in December.

"It's always challenging when students try to complete a two-year degree in three semesters," Duthie said. "Shunka and Waka have taken summer school and worked really hard to complete their degrees. I'm really proud of them and how hard they worked. I know it will make a difference when they start looking for jobs in Okinawa."

Duthie and the Sakuda sisters know that when they do return home, their American education – both inside and outside of the classroom – will be the competitive edge they need to find a good career. ■