

community

From two worlds apart they found one

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STAFF WRITER

American Leza Lowitz was ready to leave Japan when she met her future husband, Shogo Oketani, at a Yokohama jazz club.

She stayed and they dated for a year, but still she felt a nagging desire to go home. So when she told him of her plans to return to California, he said: "If you're unhappy here, you won't be happy with

man. I thought they were a couple!

When did you marry?

Leza: We registered our marriage at the U.S. Embassy on Feb. 28, 1994, and at the ward office on March 3. We celebrate March 3 because for me, it wasn't complete on Feb. 28. I was married to him, but he hadn't yet married me.

Shogo: Either day we celebrate is fine. We had small parties in Japan and the U.S. but no major ceremony.

Was it a smooth path to your marriage?

Leza: We dated about a year in Japan. Then we had a long-distance relationship for about a year. Then I left for the U.S. because I missed California. Shogo is so mellow, so it was all smooth.

Shogo: After she left, we met in Tokyo and California several times. We got married in Tokyo. It worked out OK as we both liked time together and time apart. She worked on getting me a U.S. visa, then I moved to California to be with her in July 1994.

How did your parents react to your marriage?

Shogo: They asked me if I was OK marrying a foreigner. I said "Yes," and they said, "We're OK if you're OK."

Leza: They expected me to marry a nice Jewish boy! I told them I got married after the fact, but they were happy for us. They liked Shogo.

What did you do in California?

Shogo: I was a translator in the high-tech field, and also did literary translation. In Japan I was a reporter for a semiconductor magazine. I was mainly translating from English to Japanese.

Leza: I was teaching yoga and writing. The things I love, the same things I'm doing here.

When and why did you return to Japan?

Shogo: We stayed in the U.S. until 2004, then the Iraqi war broke out. I was out on the street protesting the war, and the town where we lived, about an hour from San Francisco, became more conservative. We thought of moving to an urban area but couldn't find the right place.

Leza: I didn't really want to return to Japan, but I thought "It's only fair. He's been in the U.S. 10 years, now it's my turn to live here."

What was the procedure for adopting your son?

Shogo: We went to a child consultation center at our ward office, filled out an

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adoption application and basically waited. We were told it would be difficult for us to adopt a child because we were on the older scale of applicants, and the priority went to younger couples. Then, the child consultation center called to say, "There's a child available for adoption. Are you interested?" We said yes and they put us on a waiting list. But we didn't get the placement.

This happened a few times, so then we told them, "Please just automatically put us on a waiting list. We don't care if it's a

boy or a girl, any age, any handicaps, or anything. We're definitely interested!" Then we finally got Yuto from the center. He was 1 year and 7 months old, relatively old for an adoption candidate. That may be why we were chosen.

Leza: We are so lucky to have Yuto. I believe he is our destiny.

Shogo: Yes, I think so, too. We were fated to be a family.

Has it been difficult?

Leza: I think the challenges are what all families face. Yuto is an amazing kid. He was raised in an orphanage, but he was taken good care of there. In the beginning, he was curious where babies come from. He once said, "Did I come from Mom's tummy?" And I said, "You came from my heart." He's quite smart. He intuitively understood.

Shogo: We don't know much about his biological parents other than that they are Japanese. We tell him that he is special, and that we chose each other as a family. I'm thinking we'll sit down with him and have a serious conversation about it when he turns 6. That may be about the age he will understand what it really means. There's so much love between us all, that's the main thing.

What language do you speak to each other? To your son?

Leza: To each other, 80 percent English, 20 percent Japanese. I'd like to speak only English to Yuto, but sometimes I have to use Japanese, like when he doesn't understand and says, "Mommy, say it in Japanese, please." We have an English day once a week where we both speak only English to him. Yuto completely understands it, and when we go to the U.S., he speaks English to friends and family.

Shogo: I speak Japanese to him. Every night I read him two books in Japanese, and Leza reads him books in English.



Family affair: Leza Lowitz, Shogo Oketani and their son, Yuto Dashiell Oketani, pose at Meiji Shrine in Tokyo's Shibuya Ward in November. COURTESY OF LEZA LOWITZ

What are your schooling plans for Yuto?

Shogo: We're thinking of sending him to a public elementary school. He can start reading English from junior high school, but he needs to get used to speaking and listening from an early age.

Leza: I prefer international school because they're more creative and free, in my opinion. In international schools, you can be yourself. He has Japanese and foreign friends here, and I want all worlds to be open to him. I want him to know there are no boundaries.