

Crashing into Corporate America

Former Cargill Executive Shares Story of Her Climb to the Top

By Rachel M. Anderson, Contributing Writer

(Twin Cities, MN) – After more than 40 years of working—most of them in and with corporate America—Elaine Koyama has now entered a time in her life when she gets to do what she wants to do, not what she has to do.

She loves to travel, ski, play tennis and spend time with friends and family. She also enjoys writing, and in addition to blogging and offering writing retreats for like-minded individuals, she will soon have her first book published.

LET ME IN: A Japanese American Woman Crashes the Corporate Club 1976 – 1996

(Beaver's Pond Press, 2019), scheduled for release in Aug. 2019, is the story of Koyama's journey from her family farm in Montana to a management role at Cargill, a Minnesota-based conglomerate that provides food, agriculture, financial and industrial products and services to the world. The book validates what a lot of us went through during that period," she says. "Ordinary people opening doors—gaining entry to what used to be an all boy's club—and making things happen."

Koyama's story begins with what it was like to grow up as a Japanese American woman on a Montana sheep, wheat, and sugar beet farm in eastern Montana. "We were like every other farm family during the 1960s," she writes in Part 1 of the book. "We worked together in the fields, had big farm meals cooked by the women, and watched 'Bonanza' and Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color, clustered around the one TV set after dinner. Okay, so there was one little difference between our family and most of the other farmers in Hardin—we were Japanese."

Koyama may have been a minority woman, but she didn't let that hold her back. After high school she moved to California to attend Stanford University. She earned a degree in political science/social science. Many of her contemporaries headed to law school, but she felt compelled to find a job as quickly as she could to pay back a \$10,000 student loan. She interviewed with two companies she could easily relate to due to her agriculture background: Cook Industries and Cargill.

"A job in corporate America seemed like a viable option," she says.

In the book, Koyama shares how she ended up getting an offer to enter a management training program at Cargill, and work her way up. "I started in farm to farm sales because at the time they said you had to start at the grass roots. If you were successful at different job levels you could advance."

And advance she did, from territory manager to sales manager, to product manager, and ultimately a high-level position in marketing where she implemented change at the company. Koyama is credited with starting the first mentor program for management hires, and executing new product rollouts in ways that had never been done before.

In the book, Koyama also reveals how she—a minority woman—was able to get ahead at a time when the "old boy's network" was running the company. "The strategy I used was not so much

pushing, but cajoling,” she explains. “A big part of getting ahead was winning people over and getting accepted. That strategy worked for me more often than not.”

Other lessons shared in Koyama’s memoir about her climb to the top at one of America’s leading corporations include: timing is everything, goals change, life balance is important, and if after ten (or twenty) years your goals have not been met, it’s probably time to move on. “I didn’t get as high as I wanted to in management (at Cargill),” says Koyama, “but my success opened doors for others.”

Koyama spent 20 years at Cargill before leaving the company to become an entrepreneur. She and her partner owned and operated Interlinx Associates, a sales and marketing IT consulting firm, for 20 years before selling the company.

Early reviews of the book have been very favorable. “Elaine Koyama is a pioneer, who moved east from her childhood home in Montana to Minneapolis to explore the frontier that women faced breaking into leadership in corporate America. Her story is one of navigating the unknown, the inner-strength to tackle insurmountable obstacles, and a triumph of the spirit. Her perseverance, courage, and humanity will be of interest to both men and women with aspirations for corporate leadership,” said Dr. Stefanie Lenway, University of St. Thomas Dean and Opus Distinguished Chair at the Opus College of Business in Minneapolis.

“Engaging, insightful, this book resonates across culture, ethnicity and gender. An often humorous look into managing a career,” said Stephanie Keire, who was an Executive Vice President at Wells Fargo Bank when she retired in 2012.

Once the book is released, Koyama is hoping young women entering the workforce will see it as a resource to turn to for insights as they embark on their own careers. She is also confident women her age will relate to the stories in the book and feel validated. Men who read the book will gain insight on the challenges women and minorities faced then and face now.

Visit ElaineKoyama.com to follow Elaine’s blog, “Musings of an UnGeisha,” and learn about other works-in-progress. More information about her writing retreat can be found at Retreat2Write.com.

About the Author



Elaine Koyama grew up on a sheep, wheat, and sugar beet farm in eastern Montana. She was the youngest in a family of eight sansei (third generation) Japanese Americans, a cheerleader, shot putter and graduate of Stanford University. She spent 20 years at Cargill, 20 years as an entrepreneur, and plans on spending the next 20 years writing.

Koyama is the mother of three adult children and with her Yorkipoo Kiba, splits her time between Miltona and Minneapolis, Minnesota (though she considers Hardin, Montana home.) Independent and undaunted her most recent adventure took her on a

10,000 mile, 13 state solo road trip where she skied 300,000 vertical feet at 20 western mountain resorts.

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