

LET ME IN Interview Resources

Contact elaine@elainekoyama.com to schedule interviews.

Q & A with Elaine Koyama

Why did you write LET ME IN?

I started almost forty years ago, writing stories about strange and wonderful things that were happening to me in deepest, darkest Iowa. I didn't want to forget, and I really did say to myself that someday my grandkids should know what I did in the olden days.

No offense, but why should I read your book? You aren't famous, and you didn't have stellar success.

Stellar success never happens without a cast of supporting characters. As I look back, it was because of the thousands of women like me who were succeeding incrementally that made stellar success happen for someone else. You know Robert Frost and the two roads diverging in the woods? I took the less traveled and had such interesting, weird and wonderful things happen to me! Just like most of the women of my era who were forging new routes through the forests.

Why would men want to read your book or hear you speak?

I believe men and women are more similar than different. Men who have read the book have told me, "The same thing happened to me!" Or "I can't believe that really happened!" or "What's wrong with that?" I want men and women to have the chance to see this sliver of business history and try to relate it to their experience. We accomplished a lot in 20 years at Cargill, and it was all done working side by side with men. We can get more done together than apart.

Who was most influential in your corporate success?

The easy answer is "my mom and dad." But they didn't know or understand corporate America. In the context of my book, I would say that leadership at Cargill was instrumental in advancing women. Pete McVay was the president of Cargill when I started, and his daughter was the first woman hired onto the training program. He advocated not only for his daughter, but for all of the women being hired at the time. Clearly no one was going to cross Pete's daughter, and by association, we were in that camp. I felt I was treated fairly through most of my career because the senior leadership recognized the gap. Their behavior influenced the behavior of the men I reported to directly and guided the way they treated me.

You have said if you had stayed at Cargill longer, you would have risen higher. Why did you leave?

Senior management changed and I no longer had a mentor to advocate for me. I had joined Cargill in 1976 when it was common for guys to hire on for life. I never wanted to be one of those guys and after 20 years I figured I could learn more on the outside than what I was learning on the inside of the company. And truthfully, I had a gut feeling it was the right thing to do. And it was.

What advice would you give a young person today?

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Overnight success is usually a culmination of 10 years of hard work. If it hasn't happened in 10 years, it probably won't happen. It takes a lot of kissing frogs to get a prince charming.

I guess that's four pieces of advice.

What's next on your bucket list?

I've had a hell of a year, and I'm ready to get into a routine. For me that will mean working this book deal until the seeds I sow bear fruit. I have a couple other books in mind, one that I did research on when I was on my Ski Sojourn. It will be a historical fiction loosely based on my mother's diaries. I feel as though I am just beginning.