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Oral History of

Meiko Mori Howell

Alumna, Class of 1998

Date: May 14, 2014

Interviewed by Art Ford

Professor *Emeritus* of English and Alumnus, Class of 1959

Transcribed by

Vernon and Doris Bishop Library Staff

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Mrs. Meiko Mori Howell '98—A native of Yokohama, Japan, Howell arrived at The Valley in 1994 to major in psychology. As Meiko notes, being an international student at an American college is itself an experiment in psychology. She discusses at length her experiences as an international student on the Valley campus. Today, she is a school psychologist in the Washington, D.C., School District.

A. This is Art Ford. I'm talking with Meiko Mori in my home here in Annville. The date is May 14, 2014. Meiko is originally from Japan, and we're going to be talking about her experiences here as an international student, and something about herself as well. So Mei, let me begin with some questions about your background. Where are you from?

M. I am from Yokohama, Japan. Yokohama is a port city, an international city that is only 30 minutes to the south of Tokyo.

A. And your father and mother, what are their occupations?

M. My father is an architect, and my mother used to be a school teacher for 20-something years. Then she became a school counselor. Right now, I think she is waiting to be ordained, and she wants to be a minister.

A. Really?

M. In the Baptist church.

A. So, obviously they both attended college. Where?

M. My father attended a university called Waseda University in Tokyo, and my mother attended another university in Tokyo called Meiji Gakuin University.

A. Okay. Do you have any siblings?

M. I do. I have an older sister. Her name is Ayako. She attended university as well, and the name of the school is Wako University.

A. And she got an undergraduate degree there?

M. She did.

A. Did your father have an advanced degree?

M. I do not think so.

A. Okay. The name of the high school you attended.

M. It's a long one—Tamagawa Sei Gakuin. It was what we call a missionary school, a Christian school, a private school in Tokyo.

A. And when you graduated from there, you decided to go to college, and you came to the states to do that?

M. Yes.

A. Were you at any school there?

M. No, I didn't attend any college there. I came here for college.

A. And why did you do that?

M. I wanted to study psychology, and even then and even today, psychology is much more advanced in this country than back home, so I knew that I had to come to the United States if I wanted to be a good psychologist. That was probably the motivation.

A. Did you major then in psychology here?

M. I did.

A. Why did you pick Lebanon Valley?

M. Well, there is this organization in Japan that functions like a matchmaker, a type of company or agency. They gave me some sort of placement test, and since I scored high enough I was able to pick a lot of schools, and Lebanon Valley College happened to be the most difficult one to get into. That's all I actually knew about LVC.

A. So you picked the most difficult one?

M. Exactly.

A. Did you think you could learn more at The Valley?

M. Yes. I thought so.

A. Did it turn out to be true?

M. Yes, it was wonderful. Yes.

A. When did you arrive here?

M. I arrived here in August of 1994.

A. The organization that brought you here. What was the name of that?

M. I think it was called the East-West Foundation.

A. So, you arrived in 1994, you said. What were your impressions of the College, physically, when you arrived? Just the appearance of it?

M. I thought it was a beautiful campus, lots of green and everything was well taken care of. I thought it was really quiet. I especially remember the church on the corner of Main Street and North College Avenue. I thought that was beautiful too, although that was not part of the College. I just thought the buildings were beautiful.

A. What did you do the first few weeks on campus? Did you have trouble adapting to the College, or to college life? Academics?

M. Academics. Socially it wasn't as difficult. I actually had a lot of American students come to me and ask me a bunch of questions about where I came from, why I came. But at the same time those are the people that told me later on that they had trouble getting used to the life here too, so what I was experiencing I was able to tell myself that I was not the only one who wouldn't be able to carry on a conversation in English. So the first time I realized that yes, it was hard, but I think it was due to the language barrier. My English was okay, but it wasn't good enough academically, so I had to learn to accept how much I could do academically because I

was never used to being the lowest performing student when I was home, so I had to accept it would take me forever to read a book or just read one page. I just had to learn to be patient with myself. But other than that I would have to say it was great. I mean we had good support like you. I remember you being the first person I met as you came to pick me up at the airport in Harrisburg. And also Vicki [Gingrich], the international student advisor, came over to my dorm room to introduce herself and it was so considerate and thoughtful. I was able to open up to her right away. So I really had a good time.

A. Did the students treat you pretty well?

M. They didn't seem, I don't want to say uncomfortable, but they weren't used to being around somebody from another country; however, there were a few students who were telling me that they knew a Japanese exchange student in high school and things like that. They would have something to ask me about, and I never felt anything like... Some of them felt a little distant. But at the same time, they didn't really seem to be mean or rude or anything like that, and I'm pretty sure I would have done the same thing. I think they just weren't used to being around foreign students. Back home I probably wouldn't be as friendly or as approachable.

A. How long did it take you to feel comfortable with the other students, with your classmates, with the academic side?

M. I would have to say one year at least, but one of the greatest things that happened to me was that there was this psychology professor. Her name is Dr. [Deanna] Dodson. She eventually became my academic advisor, but when I came back for the second year, she asked me, she said 'It seems like you are taking a class from me. What kind of help can I give to you?' I wasn't really sure what I needed; I just knew that it was so hard, so what I said was, well, I have trouble

taking notes. I could listen, I could understand, but by the time I tried to summarize and put down the thought and put down what was spoken, I was already two or three topics behind. So by then I would be lost, and if I couldn't understand the basic concepts then pretty much for the rest of the class I couldn't understand. So what she did was amazing. She actually asked me to come to her office during her office hours. She had something like two hours on Tuesday and Thursday and she might have had an hour or two on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. She would let me come, and she would basically do the whole lecture for me, and she basically created all the learning experiences for me. She didn't pressure me to read, but she did tell me to read the books after we would meet, so that I could find it easier to understand what was being said in the book. She spent that amount of time every week. I mean every day and every week.

A. And was that throughout the entire course?

M. Absolutely. It was amazing because initially I would bring my notebook with blank pages, and I started writing down some topics that she might have written down on the board. Then maybe a month, two months later I started to write down more. And I also took another class from here in the spring, so by the end of the spring semester I was pretty much able to write down just like a typical American student with some concepts I really did understand. So by the end of the second year I would like to say that I was able to learn and to take advantage of all the learning opportunities, but without the help I don't think I would have been able to be there.

A. Did you have freshman English?

M. I had ESL, English as a Second Language. It was great. I thought it was helpful, but I really have to be honest, when I took the regular English class during my second year, there was a huge jump. It was not that easy, but at the same time I remember I lost this book that really spelled out the grammatical rules and all that kind of good stuff, and I was able to utilize it, so I think that was when my English started to get better, like more academically suitable.

A. So by the time you graduated, you felt pretty comfortable in English?

M. Absolutely, yes. I had the support, although it was definitely unofficial, but without the support I don't think I would have been successful.

A. Now you mentioned Dr. Dodson's help. Were there other courses you enjoyed, other professors?

M. I liked all of the psychology classes. I also liked the studio art classes. Since I was struggling academically, I needed to bring up my GPA, and I happened to be able to paint, draw, so I took those art classes that really taught me a lot of things about life. They would teach us how to paint better, how to capture something better. But at the same time all of them had some type of philosophy about life. One of the classes that I took was with Mr. Dan Massad, his pastel class. What I liked about him was one of the things he said was that if you want to paint a lemon, logically we would take out a yellow pastel, but there's actually more than one color in that yellow, so if you take a yellow pastel to paint the lemon it's logically correct but perceptually wrong, and that meant a lot of to me as a psychology major because of course... I still struggle with this but when I was even younger, it was all either black or white to me. I mean you're either wrong or right. Logically, that might be okay, but perceptions can vary from one person to another, and if I want myself to be understood then I would have to accept

another person's perception as well. So I really enjoyed that. It really helped me grow as a person.

A. And not just as an artist? Any other classes or teachers that stand out in your mind?

M. Oh, I forgot about him. He was a math teacher. His name is Mr. Tim Dewald. I had his algebra class during my freshman year, and yes he was very helpful. Math wasn't really all that difficult for me, but he already knew that as a foreign student probably not everything was all that easy. So he would ask me how I was doing. I remember one time that we had a meeting so he could listen to some sort of struggle that I had. Again it was not the formal type of support, but again I felt being supported, I felt being comfortable.

A. There were some other international students here when you were here as well. How did the group get along with each other?

M. Oh, yes, I don't know. I don't know how we did it, but personally I was so fascinated to get to meet people from basically all over the world, and one of the things that really impressed me was that when students came from Europe they all spoke five or six languages. And to me being able to speak another language, a second language, was more than enough to handle. There was a student from Czech, and she said, well, I speak Czech. I can speak German or something. And then English was one of the foreign languages that you have to learn, so if you know German and English, so Swedish is somewhere in between, so I can understand Swedish. And French is one of the common languages in Europe. So I was counting the number of languages and that really impressed me. Also I found a lot of similarities between Asian people and Hispanic people, especially when they show some type of respect for family members, but it's more like they like the elderly and things like that. So I was able to find something common

among international students, although they don't necessarily have to come from Asia. So all those experiences helped me to understand my own culture, and that was very helpful. So we got along pretty well because we sort of experienced something similar. Also we were able to accept each other because we knew that we had another language or culture that other people might not know about. So we actually impressed each other a lot.

A. Did you make friends with American students?

M. I would say so. I lost touch with most of them, but I did make great friends that I could turn to for help or support.

A. How about your first year? Were you homesick?

M. I was. I was.

A. How did you deal with that?

M. I just sucked it up. (laughter) I didn't know what to do about it. I missed home so much. But the funny thing was when I went home for summer, and when I came back by the end of the summer I actually missed being back here. I really wanted to start learning better, making friends better. I knew that, oh my goodness, I thought that I wanted to come home so bad by the end of the first year, but then I really wanted to come back here. I was surprised. I never thought that I would feel that way.

A. Did you go home every summer?

M. I did. I went home for Christmas too, but the first year I went to New York because at the time there was my father's brother, my uncle, and his wife were stationed in New York, so I went there to spend the Christmas time. I actually told my parents that I wanted to stay because I felt like I was somehow losing a battle. I don't know what battle it was, but I felt like if

I went home I would feel like I would be some kind of a loser. I wanted to, I guess, I don't know, I don't know what I was really thinking, but I felt like if I have to go home then I did not accomplish something, and I don't know. I was young.

A. I think there were some other students from Japan here too. How did that work out?

M. It was actually a very interesting dynamic. I knew, number one, that just because someone else was also from Japan didn't mean we shared the same culture. That was like the biggest lesson that I learned.

A. Can you expand on that?

M. Sure. Like for example I had some level of English, and that's because I went to this Christian school where the school principal was a minister from the United States, and there were five or six missionaries on the campus, and it was very important for us to speak English. Although it was an international school, it was not uncommon to have classmates who spent their childhoods overseas. They just came back from Italy or they just came back from the United States, or something like that. It wasn't all that uncommon to have friends who didn't really grow up in Japan, for example. So when I first came here I was the second youngest Japanese student, and I felt, I could be wrong, but I felt that the older Japanese students didn't seem to like the fact that I seemed okay because they all went through some more difficulty than I did, so that's kind of how I felt. But then again I probably was kind of fresh too. I must have said something rude, I must have said something I probably shouldn't have. And I had to realize that my world was very small. So that's kind of how I felt. I really don't know what the difference was, but I felt like I was under a microscope by the other Japanese students rather than by American students.

A. Do you have any idea how many international students were here when you were here?

M. Maybe, I think we had 30 to 40. Am I wrong? I don't know. I just remember the number 30 for some reason, but there were probably more than that. Our group, I think 10 of us came together in '94, and there were five to ten students in each grade, so I would say somewhere around 30 to 40, not including the ones that do have families here because some had been here since middle school or something like that. So when I'm counting international students, I'm counting those that were here by themselves, not having a family over here.

A. Were you aware when you were doing this how much you were contributing to the College? Just by being there the college students' educations were enriched.

M. I felt like I was the one who was benefitting. I never thought that I was benefitting anyone else. I always thought I was the one who was getting all the benefits.

A. What kinds of extra activities did you participate in?

M. I didn't participate in anything actually. I do remember being on the international program during my first year.

A. What was that?

M. I didn't know what it was. Looking back I like to think that I had an understanding. The ESL teacher, I don't remember her name, but her first name was Judy [Pehrson]. I think she is the one who asked me and another student in her class to be the student representative, so I got to express what kind of things that I would have wished I could have ideas of what things I could have for international students. The funny part was that the American student representative was much more sympathetic about us than we were about us. The other international student and I were saying well I understand that some of the international students here were really

not used to interacting with somebody from another culture. We would behave the same way back home. There's really nothing wrong with anything. It's just so wonderful that we're here. But I remember some saying that international students don't have any outlet, emotionally or stuff like that. And I was thinking I guess people experience things different. And I could say that it wasn't that negative.

A. So the whole experience for you was a sort of experiment in psychology then. These things were happening to you and other people around you.

M. Yes.

A. Do you remember, did they have the International Student Organization then?

M. Yes, we did. Vicki was able to organize the group, I think, and I think you were one of the major members of the organization, and yes, that's right, that was an extra-curricular activity. Basically, that's all I had. I don't remember how often but I would say often enough, once or twice a semester we would get together and go somewhere. I think it was either weekly or monthly we would have meetings, and it was very nice because some of the people looked familiar and I got to meet some of the people there too. It was great.

A. So that's the extent of the involvement outside the classroom?

M. Yes.

A. How important was Vicki to all of the students in your experience?

M. Oh, my gosh, she was everything. She did so much. It was just so much, like you and your wife had been great. I really don't think I knew how much she had done for us until after we graduated. That's how I felt. I knew she was somebody we could talk to. One of the great things about her style was that she was so helpful outside of her office, not just in the office. She was

very approachable and knowledgeable. You could just go to her with any type of concerns, and she would basically give you a nice insight into any difficult and challenging situation. I really enjoyed that. She was not old enough to be my mother, but I like to say she was like my big sister. I think she has done so much for us. I don't remember anyone complaining about her at all, especially boys. I think they looked up to her more as a mother.

A. Let me go outside the College now for a moment. You graduated in 1998, and you graduated on time.

M. Yes, I did.

A. Did it get easier for you over the four years? Did you get smarter?

M. I would say so, absolutely, and again, since I was young, I don't think I had the appreciation I should have had. But even then I knew that I was able to make it through college in four years because it was small and because I had the support. I didn't know that I should appreciate it more. Even then I knew that I was able to graduate on time with the support that I had.

Without that support I really don't think I would have been able to graduate. It was definitely a great experience for me because now I didn't go straight to a graduate school after that. I actually went back home and stayed there for five years before coming back here for graduate school.

A. What were you doing then, that five-year period?

M. Oh, I was in real estate.

A. Really?

M. I knew I wanted to come back here for graduate school, so my purpose was to make money and also to maintain my English language skills, so I found this type of agency where there were

major U.S. companies, and these companies send their executives overseas and those executives, called ex-pats, usually brought their families, and they are usually put on a two-year long assignment, so the agency was to kind of help those American companies assist their employees. So I got to speak Japanese and English. I got to learn how to write business letters in English as well. So, I just wanted to improve my English language although even then I don't think my English was... My spoken English was okay, and my written English might have been okay, but at the same time, my vocabulary wasn't as strong, so I still had to learn new words every day.

A. You did that for all five years?

M. All five years.

A. And then you left to come back to graduate school? Where did you go to graduate school?

M. Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, the school for the deaf. I actually didn't know about that. It was funny because on the application form I had to fill out they would ask if I was deaf or hard of hearing, and I was like, what does it have anything to do with it. But I applied and they accepted me, but when they accepted me, they wanted a statement from me saying how I was okay with being part of the deaf community. I guess that nowadays deaf people like to say that that's a community, but they like to say that they're a language minority other than being just a group of people with a disability. So they try to emphasize the cultural aspect of that deaf community, or deafness. I actually didn't have any trouble getting accustomed to it because I already had some type of experience that challenged my value systems. I went through the kind of cultural transition, so it wasn't difficult for me to open-minded.

A. Did you learn to sign?

M. Yes, I did.

A. Can you still do that?

M. Yes. And I still do that with deaf students too. I then pursued a degree in school psychology, and I became a school psychologist because I actually wanted to do something with the students who have learning disabilities. Again, it was the developmental psychologist class with Dr. Dodson when I learned about learning disabilities for the first time. I was able to sympathize with the students' disabilities because I thought I had something similar, but I had my disability with language deficiency, although I'm not sure if I actually had a learning disability. But when I was learning about it I was, 'Oh, my goodness, here was a group of people experiencing what I was experiencing,' so when I was trying to choose my own profession, I wanted to choose something similar. I was on the clinical psychology track when I was at LVC, but also developed some sort of interest in developmental psychology, so at the time I felt that school psychology was suitable. So that's how I chose my profession. Even today I love what I do.

A. You're still doing the same thing?

M. Yes.

A. In Washington, D.C.?

M. Yes.

A. Are you in the Washington, D.C., school district?

M. Yes

A. Just to go back to Gallaudet for just a minute, why did you choose that for graduate school?

M. I wanted to go to a school in Washington, D.C. Actually, now that you say it I actually wanted to go to D.C. because it was the first place we visited when we took a trip to—Oh, my

goodness—that's another extra-curricular activity that I didn't think that I had, but I think that every month or two or three times a semester LVC would arrange for students to get on a bus and go to Baltimore, D.C., or New York, and other nice places for free. So D.C. was the first trip that I made, and I was walking around with you and you were showing us around, and that memory was so positive that I wanted to go to D.C.

A. And you probably wanted to be in a big city after being in a small town.

M. That's true. Because when I first came I was looking for tall buildings and high rises coming from Yokohama. I just thought I would see those tall buildings because we were just outside a big city. I was just too naïve.

A. You arrived in Harrisburg and you flew from Tokyo, I guess.

M. Well, that foundation or organization that served as a matchmaking company. They had me and some other students take some summer classes in Georgia. So I took the plane from Atlanta to Baltimore, and I flew to Harrisburg from Baltimore.

A. And I met you there.

M. Yes.

A. What if nobody had met you there, would that have been anxiety for you?

M. Absolutely. I didn't even know how you knew about it because the organization just wanted us to fly. I said can I speak to somebody at the College. They said, oh no, we don't do that. And all of us are feeling anxiety. We really didn't know So I thought, okay, I'm just going to fly and see what's going to happen. But honestly, I really didn't know what I could have done, especially since this College is not just down the street from Harrisburg.

A. You had no idea how you would get to Annville from Harrisburg?

M. Absolutely not.

A. You were going on a lot of faith there, weren't you?

M. Since I was young, I didn't really know what kind of shape I was in.

A. I wanted to ask you this question earlier, but we got off on another subject, but I'm interested in what you thought of the teaching style at Lebanon Valley College, which is similar to a lot of other schools obviously, but was it similar to what you would expect in Japan?

M. No, not at all because a lot of universities in Tokyo or even in my home town of Yokohama are not uncommon to have a setting where hundreds of students will be listening to a lecture, so compared to that and again I only know LVC and Gallaudet so we don't have a good sample of school experiences. But now that you mention it, it was wonderful to be in a classroom with maybe 10 or 15 students during my freshman year because a bunch of people take the same classes. When you take classes during your junior or senior year, you're probably one of 10 students maybe so I really did feel like I got a lot of good attention. If I needed help, Dr. Dodson was phenomenal. And she wasn't the only one. I guess that by the end of my sophomore year I learned to talk to different professors, and to get the kind of help they could give me. So I would say, now that you mention it, the experience was different from what I expected. If I had gone to a larger school, then I don't think I would have received as much support.

A. If you had stayed in Japan and gone to school there, would that have been different from what you had here.

M. I would say yes. I would say so. I actually want to say that I was able to do a lot of things because I of the education I had in Japan; however, it's very common for university students to kind of become complacent because they get burned out. They study so hard and they have to

be so successful so early on that by the time they get to college, they actually don't even plan to study. They just want to play and have a good time, and they could still graduate so every time I would come home and share my experience most of my friends or even my family members were so surprised, in a good way, that I was learning something, and I was remaining motivated. They used to comment that I was learning so much, that I was growing as a person. I was trying to do something with my life. So I really think that's one of the biggest differences.

A. You talk about your life. You still have most of it left. What do you hope to accomplish? Where do you hope to go from here?

M. I really do like my field, which is school psychology, and if possible I still want to go back to school for a doctorate degree. So I would like to get a couple of credentials in neuropsychology and do pediatric psychology. I still have a good interest in what people call school psychology, so when I conduct school evaluations I could use my knowledge in neuropsychology to basically make sense out of how people learn. It just so happens that neuropsychology gives me a lot of clues into understanding how people learn differently and especially the ones with disabilities can compensate for their weakness. So that's kind of what I would like to do.

A. I have one final question, but before I get to that, is there anything else you want to make sure that people listening to this 200 years from now know about you or about the school?

M. Well, right now what I'm thinking about is how grateful I am and how honored I am to have graduated from LVC and also to have this opportunity to share my experiences, so I'm really grateful.

A. The final question then is, and you've been answering this along so you might not have more to say about it, but's one I always end with. What does the College, what does Lebanon Valley College mean to you?

M. Wow! It actually gave me the foundation that allowed me to be able to do what I enjoy doing today, actually to be able to live here in this country and be able to pay the bills.

(laughter) But also it was the foundation that really gave me the opportunity to even decide what I wanted to be as a professional and to pursue a field that I really enjoy being in. So to me the experience and the education I had at LVC really solidified the education I had to be successful in this country.

A. Well, that's a good way to end, I think. Thank you very much.

M. Thank you very much.