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### Interview with Professor Kumazawa

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## Interview with Professor Kumazawa

# Interview with Professor Kumazawa

*Mahi Garg*

Had the phrase “gone full circle” not been so ancient, I would have guessed that it was invented by someone who met with Professor Risa Kumazawa. Her interest in economics started at Illinois Wesleyan as a student, only to be brought back to good old Wesleyan in the capacity of a professor. This isn’t the only circle though – she was one of the founding members of the Park Place Economist. Her association with the journal started as an editor, and has continued now in the form of an article in her name.

This is not to suggest that she has spent her life only in areas familiar to her, however. Quite the contrary, she came to Wesleyan straight from Japan, where she had been born and raised – quite a bold move in my opinion. Why Wesleyan all of places? Her brother was studying here, so she and her twin sister followed in his footsteps. She started pursuing her bachelor’s degree in Economics with a minor in Mathematics in 1990. After getting a Master’s degree from Illinois State, she went to the University of Texas at Austin where she completed her Ph.D.

Her dissertation was on the effects of welfare generosity on the behavioral responses of welfare-prone women. She made quite a few rather interesting observations, but the one that fascinated me most was the relationship between welfare generosity and women who often remarry. Women divorced from a first marriage and later married were more likely to have used welfare benefits as a substitute source of income while they were single! She chose this subject because of her love for labor economics and through her interest and coursework in sociology. Dr. Sikora, currently a professor of sociology at

Wesleyan, was her host father, and he helped in nurturing this interest during her Research Honors project.

While finishing her dissertation at Austin last year, she started her first faculty position at the University of Mississippi’s economics department where she had a research grant from the U.S. Navy. It was this position that helped her determine that she needed more teaching experience. She returned to her alma mater for this purpose. A big influence in that decision was Dr. Seeborg, with whom she has shared great relationships in various areas. He was her advisor, mentor, and co-author, and is now a colleague. They wrote a paper together on the educational attainment of teenage unmarried mothers, further evidence of her interest in labor economics.

One of the biggest changes that she noticed since her return to IWU, is a decline in the number of international students. She enjoyed the various perspectives they would bring to class, and is disappointed by the waning numbers. A lot of things have stayed the same though. She was taught by professors Leekley, Chapman and Seeborg, who are all still essential members of our economics faculty.

Unfortunately, she will be leaving us at the end of the semester. She plans to pursue a balanced career in teaching and research but at a larger university, something that she cannot do at a liberal arts college like IWU. She hopes to be remembered as someone who encouraged students to continue in Economics. Encouragement was what helped her in deciding to pursue a Ph.D., and she hopes to help someone else in a similar fashion.