

## Sara Su Jones

### Life On Her Own Terms

91 Sara Su Jones, formerly of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, says her life's greatest achievement isn't helping to negotiate and finalize the documents signed by Vice President Al Gore during the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission meetings. It's not being named Most Promising Young Musician of the Year at 1992's Bristol Proms Festival in England and having her winning performance broadcast by the BBC. It's not graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard and landing a job at the highly competitive consulting firm McKinsey & Company, or earning a JD degree from Harvard Law and then working at the distinguished law firm Ropes & Gray LLP.

Her greatest achievement is giving much of that up to care for her mother, who suffers from severe rheumatoid arthritis. In doing so, Jones sought and found success and happiness on her own terms.

"I don't define success in conventional, material ways, such as attending prestigious schools or working for brand-name employers," she says. "Happiness comes from making the choices that are right for you. Success is simply making the most of the opportunities you have decided to pursue."

Jones's relationship with her mother, Chaesun Baek, has always been a close one. She describes her mother as her best friend, her counselor, her confidant, and the "chairman of the board" of her solo teaching business. Baek is at the top of the list of people Jones admires, and she lists her mother's grace, strength, wisdom, and good humor in the face of excruciating daily pain as qualities she hopes to emulate.

Not long after Jones started working at McKinsey, Baek's health deteriorated to the point where she needed a live-in caregiver. Then 22, Jones opened the doors to her Manhattan studio in 1997. Her mother has lived with her ever since.

During Jones's first year of law school, her professors urged her to try out for law review. When she discovered the time commitment was akin to that of a full-time job—and realized she would be unable to also care for her mother, who was by then housebound—Jones opted to pass on the opportunity.

"That was the point where I realized I had made a far-reaching decision," she says. "Our choices in life define us, and this is my choice. When your priorities are clear, it's easy to make decisions, even major decisions that change the course of your life." Over the years, Baek has often urged that she be put in a nursing home because she cannot bear seeing her daughter's life curtailed: "It's my turn to go to 'boarding school,'" she says. Her daughter laughs, offering this response: "I'll consider doing that when you forget who I am."

After Baek's health deteriorated to the point where Jones needed to be home most of the time, she quit her high-powered job at Ropes & Gray in Boston. It was her mother who suggested she teach small-group enrichment and test-prep classes out of their home.



"I had a flexible business plan, but I had no idea if it was going to be sustainable over the long term," she says. "Now I feel this is the best use I could make of my education. It's clearly the most meaningful, most fulfilling work I've done. I'm helping young people discover and develop their talents. And maybe I've helped a little bit to direct them toward a brighter, more fulfilling future for themselves."

Taking care of her mother also allowed Jones to move back to Chicago, a city she loves. And she once again has time for music, "arguably the most important part of who I am." She rehearses and performs as concertmaster and soloist with the Chicago Bar Association Symphony Orchestra.

In 2006 her quiet, calm life was disrupted when the Korean-language media in the United States and Korea discovered her. Jones, whose mother is Korean, was written up in numerous magazines and newspapers, approached by a major Korean TV network that wanted to do a documentary on her life, and even offered a book deal.

"The editors deemed my story newsworthy because the Korean tradition of filial piety has all but disappeared," she wrote in her Christmas letter that year, citing examples of rampant elder abuse and abandonment in Korea. She also explained that in Korean culture, success is often defined by where you went to school, how much money you make, your job, and other "superficial trappings."

"So, for a Korean looking at my résumé, it would be hard to understand why someone in my position would give all that up to stay home taking care of my mom and doing the unglamorous, unprestigious work of teaching kids."

She laughs off the media coverage, calling it surreal.

"I'm no saint," she says. "If my mom hadn't become disabled and needed help, I'd probably be a very unhappy corporate lawyer slaving away in New York. By making the decisions I needed to for myself, I have wound up in the best possible situation."

—Melissa Beams '91