



OIDEYASU!

EVERYDAY HEROES

Itō Kameo Ranks at the Top

Jackie J. Kim

Hawai'i Herald Columnist

The Japanese are well-known throughout the world as one of the hardest-working people. Of course, one cannot assume that every Japanese person performs his or her job with passion and commitment.

For three years, I worked at various high schools throughout Niigata Prefecture as an assistant language teacher for the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) program. During my time at these Japanese schools, there were numerous teachers who really worked hard and dedicated their lives to their profession. But there were also others who did just enough and still others who sometimes read newspapers during their prep time. This last group of people would rush around the office just before 5 o'clock, making copies and busily typing up the next day's lessons on their computers. At first, I didn't understand why they would start working at the end of the day and stay the latest into the evening rather than go home. As time passed, however, things became clearer. I realized that those who stayed the latest and turned off the lights after everyone left were perceived to be the hardest-working and the most dedicated. It wasn't the quality of their work, but rather the quantity of their work hours that they wanted their supervisors to notice.

This was true in top international companies as well. I trained and worked for a time as a human resources consultant at one of Japan's largest electronic companies whose headquarters was in Ōsaka. Many employees stayed late into the night. The department head often slept on his office couch and shaved in the men's restroom in the morning. The departure greeting, "*O-saki ni shitsurei shimasu . . .*" — "Excuse me for leaving ahead of you," was most often said in a nervous whisper as, one-by-one, the employees, as quickly and quietly as possible, dashed for the door. I was one of those who stayed the longest. I must now confess though, that I sometimes sat and searched the Internet for nothing in particular in an attempt to "look busy." It was as if the few of us who held out the longest and latest competed not only for our work to be recognized, but even more importantly for the approving nod of the boss and a pat on the back by other colleagues who always left earlier.

Recently, I was greeted numerous times with a polite "*Irrashaimase . . .*" as I scanned the shelves of Kyōto's large Takashimaya department store, searching for summer sandals. Unlike in the U.S., shoe salespeople in Japan receive only an hourly wage — no sales commission. As I casually looked around, I saw saleswomen standing about, chatting in hushed whispers. They went through the motion of dusting off the same shoes repeatedly, all the while continuing their quiet conversation. I understood their thinking completely: Being paid near-minimum wage for kneeling on the floor next to a pair of sweaty feet that oftentimes went through countless pairs of shoes for that perfect fit is no one's dream job. Yet, I must admit that when compared to many other countries, at least these salespeople acknowledged their customers politely, even though it was obvious that they preferred to continue chit-chatting rather than helping a customer from whom they had nothing to personally gain. I know that feeling from having worked in both salary-based and commission-only sales

throughout college.

And then there is Itō-san, the small, elderly security guard who works at the discount market where I buy my groceries. The market is situated in the middle of the Ōmiya shopping street in northern Kyōto, my home for the past two years.



Kamitomo grocery market security guard Itō Kameo — Jackie Kim's everyday hero. (Photo by Jackie J. Kim)

Itō Kameo stands guard at the Kamitomo grocery market seven days a week — rain, snow or shine. He was born in 1943 in Shiga Prefecture. Now 68 years old, he has lived most of his adult life in Kyōto, working initially in *Nishijin ori* (kimono textile) manufacturing and later in a rice shop before becoming a security guard. He and his wife have three sons, all of whom are now grown and living on their own.

Almost every evening, I bicycle to the market and park my bicycle alongside the others in a long and packed row. Itō-san always greets me with a bright smile and a boisterous and cheery "*Konbanwa!*" ("Good evening!") to which I happily respond, "*Konbanwa!*" "It's hot, isn't it?" says Itō-san in Japanese. "Really," I reply, nodding my head in agreement. "I don't know when this will stop." "You should take care of yourself; don't let the summer bug get you," he calls out as I enter the market.

When I exit with a bag full of groceries, he rushes to my side and helps me load the basket of my bicycle. "*Arigatō, Oji-san*" — "Thank you," I say. Itō-san nods his head. "*Ki o tsukete yo*" — "Take care."

When my bread looks like it's about to fall off the full basket, he warns jokingly, "Oh, don't drop your bread." I laugh, push the bread deeper into the bag and nod my head once again in a show of thanks as I carefully maneuver my fully loaded bicycle.

Having a small, Japanese-style refrigerator, I shop almost every day for groceries. The market being only a five-minute walk from my house makes it easier. Often, I am greeted by the friendly security guard who can teach me a thing or two about true work ethics that makes him one of my everyday heroes.

Standing 5 feet tall, Itō-san is one of the most

energetic people I have ever seen. He works the large bicycle and auto parking space by himself. He greets customers in his booming yet always pleasant voice. He helps the women and the elderly arrange their bicycles and, every few minutes, lines up the incoming bicycles in an orderly manner, making more space for other bicycles. Itō-san helps women with children load their grocery bags into their bicycle baskets. He also collects the shopping carts and lines them up in a straight row. And, when boxes of new food products come in, he helps the other workers fold the cartons and stacks them up for trash pick-up.

In front of the market, there is a large recycle bin where customers can discard the Styrofoam packs that contained fish, meat, poultry and vegetables. Discarding this packing at the market reduces one's own home trash. In an effort to promote recycling, customers are rewarded with small prizes of a bag of chips or a bottle of cooking oil or soy sauce as an incentive. When the bin is full, smelling pretty ripe in the summer heat, Itō-san tries to make room for the next batch to be thrown in by customers, putting almost half of his upper torso into the bin to free up some extra space.

From the entrance area, which he sweeps, to the parking lot a short block away, he picks up discarded paper, plastic, cans and cigarette butts from the street.

In the summer heat, Itō-san folds his uniform shirt sleeves crisply in half above his elbows. In the rain, Itō-san still looks sharp in his yellow raincoat, black rubber boots and cap covered in plastic. His smile is there, although his face is wet. In the winter, he wears a heavy coat and gloves. He greets me with a simple, "*Samui, ne!*" ("It's cold, isn't it.") and reminds me, "*Ki o tsukete yo*" — "Take care of yourself." He smiles his trademark smile, though his lips are white and chapped from the frosty Kyōto winter.

I don't think Itō-san ever imagined that someone was observing him. It wasn't that I intended to. It's just that his honest work, the effort and pride that he puts into his job, the joy of greeting customers whose truth of emotion one could never pretend made him shine in my eyes without him even meaning to.

A person who I admire once told me: "Don't only look above to those on top of the mountain with their extraordinary lives. Cast your eyes on those in the valley, whose everyday feats in their own small ways contain within them honesty, integrity and humbleness that are the true characteristics of a hero."

Itō-san could not understand why in the world I wanted to do a story on him. "I'm just a security guard. There are plenty of people who are much more important and accomplished," he said, laughing. But being the good sport he is, when I brought out my camera, he broke out into a bright smile and struck a pose. ■■

Jackie J. Kim lives in Kyōto with her husband. Kim is the author of "*Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan.*" While living in Japan as a JET teacher and later as a graduate student, she interviewed elderly Korean women who had immigrated to Japan. Those interviews led to the publication of "*Hidden Treasures.*" If you're wondering about the title of Kim's column, she explained that "*Oideyasu!*" means "Welcome!" in Kyōto ben, or dialect. You can share your comments with Kim by e-mailing her at jackiejkim@hotmail.com.