

July 2, 1998

Eunsil Paik came to American and Weston from Korea; now she's bound for Oxford

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SPECIAL TO WESTON TOWN CRIER & TAB

Eunsil Paik is no ordinary young woman. Last December, she graduated a semester early from Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a perfect grade point average. And, although she knows that this feat was unusual, she thinks it is well within the reach of many others.

In 1990, the Paik family moved to Weston from their native Korea in order to, among other factors, bring their children closer to what they felt was the "hub of education" in the states. Eunsil's father, Towkwang Paik, who holds degrees in law and theology, had ties with some of Boston's academic institutions dating back to the 1950s and '60s, and thus felt that the Boston area would be the best place to bring his family.

The move to the states and to Weston proved a wise one.

Eunsil's older brother, Eunseok, has since graduated from Harvard with a degree in philosophy (which he humbly downplays as less successful because he did not equal the academic perfection of his sister) and both are now pursuing advanced degrees at Oxford University in England.

Eunsil said her father considered various communities in the Boston region, which were recommended to them by friends, including Brookline and Arlington, but finally decided on Weston due to the strength of the school

While Eunseok went away to an English language institute at the University of Michigan and then on to Harvard, Eunsil was thrust into the unfamiliar language as a student at Weston High School.

"I couldn't understand anything in school ... in the cafeteria, the teacher, jokes; it was all a cacophony to me. I would write down idioms and look up new words all the time, and then try to use them.

"The first few weeks were very hard. The language barrier and cultural differences made the situation very stressful, but it was also exciting. I had a hunger for knowledge, but also, I had no choice but to learn the language in order to get by," Eunsil said.

Eunseok, ever the protective older brother, said although this sudden immersion into the language was unavoidable, the adjustment period was difficult for Eunsil.

"Sii is small, but she is a strong person, and she didn't want to expose her difficulty to the family. That first year was very difficult for her. I remember her coming home

Eunsil chalks her difficulty up to the standard growing pains of adjusting to a new culture, and it seems this dedication and strength of will has allowed her to reach her goals.

After achieving high honors at Weston High School for all four years, Eunsil moved on to her years as an undergraduate at MIT. When entering MIT, she thought she was going to study computer science, but a random run-in with a book on brains changed her path forever.

"In high school, I was very into computers. When I went to MIT, I had no idea there was such a thing as a brain major," she said. "With computers, there is the computer and then there is you. You are separate. But brain science is about your own body and mind. Your brain controls you, with its mechanisms of memory and languages, etc., and when you study the brain, you are studying yourself.

"You are thinking about how it is that you perform the action of thought. So I started taking courses in brain science and cognitive psychology, and learning about memory. Once you learn about memory mechanisms, you can use that knowledge to encode information better and thereby learn more effectively."

Of her MIT success, she said: "I really liked what I was doing at MIT, and that, I think, was my motivating factor. It isn't enough if you're driven by competition; not enough to be pushing for grades, because everyone does that. It was natural for me to do well as a result of my desire for knowledge and my love of learning. A lot of people are just into resume building, but what good is that for humanity?"

The key, she said, was studying a topic which she not only enjoyed, but made her feel-fulfilled in the notion that it might provide her with an outlet by which to give back to the community.

But what of the building block courses that intensely focus on the foundations of the sciences?

"MIT has a lot of requirements in various departments; physics, chemistry, biology, calculus, and others in the humanities and social sciences, too. I found them all interesting, because I knew they would help me and be useful in the end, so I might as well enjoy it while I was studying them. Some of the professors were really interesting and funny, but of course some were really poor, in which event you must find other valuable traits to their

"The best thing you can do is believe in yourself. Life can get harder from time to time, it isn't always sweet. A supportive environment is surely a plus, but in demanding situations, it helps to have the courage of your convictions to focus on," she said. "Being driven by competition is limiting, but when you love what you are doing and learning, it makes the entire experience more positive. I came rather late, and some people had preconceptions of me as a foreigner or as a woman, which made them place a limit on my ability, and that was very disheartening. I felt I couldn't allow myself one single moment of laxity, but I focused on my part only.

"When you believe in yourself and do your best, you cannot be shaken by your environment. I always say, 'be a little sponge and sop up everything offered to you.' Success follows as a result."