

When a door opens, walk through it

By: [Dottie Li](#) Special to The Daily Record September 10, 2015

How did a kid born and raised in a sprawling metropolitan area of 5 million people on the other side of the world, Hefei, China, get to write a column for The Daily Record, in this historic, charming and quintessentially American community? It's another door opened to me by my work in cross-cultural communications. I am new to The Daily Record family, having been honored in June as one of Maryland's Top 100 Women 2015 by the publication. What a thrill it has been to receive this award, especially as the first Chinese woman so recognized.

One of the things I've learned on this journey is to appreciate the power of an open door. And, of course, to walk through it.

You see, I've always wanted to make a difference, to help those who need it and to offer my very best. That desire led me to create my own path, to leave my family in China and all that I knew to come to America 27 years ago. And one of the first things I was able to do professionally here was to fulfill my childhood fantasy of being a Voice of America broadcaster, what I thought about as a 9-year-old girl listening in the dark. That's because someone opened a door for me.

But I was the one to walk through it.

I was in Alabama, studying at the University of Mobile. Dr. Billy Wolfe, my communications professor, knew of my interest in VOA. And he told me that one of the men who created it lived in Mobile. Soon, arrangements were made for me to meet Mr. Kenneth R. Giddens, who was in ill health. Mrs. Giddens took a liking to me, seeing some potential I may not even realized about myself at that point. She encouraged me to go to Washington for a journalism internship. Another door. I couldn't say no to her because she had already bought me a plane ticket.

And before long, I was working at the Voice of America in the nation's capital, broadcasting across our planet to reach minds eager for real information, one of those voices that lets people know about the world far beyond where they are. That job led to my becoming a producer at C-SPAN, the national public affairs television networks, where I helped bring unfiltered information to Americans, eager to see news and public affairs for themselves.

Journalism is a wonderful profession, but I began yearning to be in the arena itself, and not to observe from the sidelines. Someone opened a door, and I took another big jump, this time into the corporate world, where I would be able to gain new experiences.

My first corporate job was as a spokesperson at a large corporation, and then a top person at an international public relations agency offered me a job as an account executive. It was another door opened.

At this point, I began making my own doors and opening them, creating my own boutique business. Eventually, I began working for the White House. Talk about being in the arena! This work took me across the United States and around the world. I remember one day in particular, floating down a river in the back country of Bangladesh, and then hiking in to a remote village

where President Bill Clinton would be visiting in a couple of days. (Of course, he was scheduled to arrive by Marine helicopter).

It's not what one might expect when answering a call to work for The White House, but there I was. I remember thinking how unlikely this unique experience was for me, and how it never would have happened if I had not walked through each of those successive doors.

To make a difference and to help people — especially those within the Asian-American community — is my passion. And that's where all those doors have taken me. My mission is to bridge the cultural divide, from both sides, so people are able to achieve their potential in our workplaces and in society here. I help individuals to alienate fewer people and build more networks to achieve their goals. They learn to communicate effectively. I help employers to understand members of their work force and to ensure that those employees are able to go as far as their talents can take them. There is a reason I see so many highly educated, talented Asian-Americans stuck in their careers: they are unable to get over cultural hurdles, to open their own doors. I help them to do just that, to avoid misunderstandings and to communicate clearly and effectively. It is the most rewarding experience to see someone who deserves it finally succeed. But they, too, must have the courage to walk through the door I am holding open, to recognize their limitations and work hard to overcome them.

It is not always easy. Sometimes it is difficult and unpleasant, especially when I deal with people who need help the most in overcoming barriers and recognizing their self-imposed limitations. Some behaviors are cultural, some are the result of an individual's lack of awareness of his/her cultural surroundings and/or a lack of emotional maturity or intelligence.

You know, The Daily Record put another door right in front of me. I didn't know what to expect when I first heard about the Top 100 Women of Maryland. But I took a chance and stepped over the threshold. And it has been wonderful, truly a blessing to meet so many accomplished women who are giving back to the community. It is a bit daunting to be in their company sometimes, but such contact makes you sharper, ups your game, as they say.

If a 9 year-old girl from halfway around the world, who didn't speak a word of English, could accomplish her dreams in America and develop newer and shinier dreams, then you can pretty much do anything, tackle any problems here in this great country. All you need is grit, substance and, perhaps, some of the tools of networking.

I didn't have the luxury of attending networking or multi-cultural training in China, but I intuitively knew how to do it before I even knew what the words were or what they meant. These days I teach and coach people how to use the tools I have developed over the years and the secrets of networking a way to the top professionally, breaking down barriers and increasing opportunities.

The more networks you have, the more fulfilling your career will be. The more fulfilled you are, the more you want to give back. So happy networking. And open those doors!

Dottie Li is the founder and managing director of TransPacific Communications LLC. She has extensive global expertise in public relations training. Her path has taken her from her hometown in China to the corridors of government, association and corporate power in Washington, D.C. Now sharing her expertise as a cross-cultural communications expert, Li also is the voice and voice coach of Rosetta Stone's Mandarin products. This is the first of an occasional series that Li is writing for Path to Excellence.