THE BEE EATER

Michelle Rhee Takes on the Nation's Worst School District

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CONTENTS

Preface v

Acknowledgments xv

INTRODUCTION 1

1 AN (ASIAN) AMERICAN LIFE 7

2 THE TRANSFORMATION BEGINS 25

3 GOING NATIONAL 45

4 WELCOME TO THE NATION'S EDUCATION SUPERFUND SITE 65

5 CLOSING SCHOOLS 93

6 RANDI AND MICHELLE 107

7 NEW HIRES, NEW FIRES 131

8 UP FROM THE FOUNDATIONS: THE CHALLENGE OF HIGH SCHOOL REFORM 157

9 RHEE'S CRITICS FIND A WINNING STORYLINE 171

10 THE MAYOR'S RACE 191

11 LESSONS LEARNED 201

12 WHAT'S NEXT? 227

Notes 245

About the Author 263

Index 265

Introduction

The usually cool October weather in Baltimore was absent that day in 1992. It was hot, especially inside the cinderblock classroom overseen by twenty-one-year-old rookie teacher Michelle Rhee at Harlem Park Elementary. The school was located in a neighborhood so seedy that it was used in "The Wire," HBO's acclaimed series about the relentless, and mostly fruitless, police campaign against drug traffickers in West Baltimore. (A decade after Rhee left Harlem Park, the television crew would use the school's parking lots for their vans, the gym for storing gear, and the streets where Rhee's students lived for their real-world drug culture.) Most homes were boarded up; every other street corner sprouted young men with no future. This was before the crack epidemic abated; many of the parents with children in Harlem Park were users. When kids showed up for school disheveled, cared for only by an older child, the principal didn't need to ask why.

"These kids were having a lot of home problems," said Linda Carter, Harlem Park's principal during Rhee's second and third years there. "Some of them actually had to sleep

under the bed because of the shootings that occurred every night. Kids might not see their mother for days and then, walking to school, see their mother high on the corner. It was just that kind of area. Before school dismissal, I would go out into the streets with some of the male teachers and clear an area, making sure no drug transactions were going on."

Carter remembers a neighborhood "summit" she organized that drew some of the movers and shakers behind the drug trade. Her goal was to stop the dealers on the small-tire bikes who would show up when the adjoining middle school was dismissed and strew drugs on the ground as a temptation. "Everyone would scatter (for the drugs) like cockroaches," said Carter.

That October day, Rhee, fresh from a sheltered academic life at Cornell University and beginning a two-year commitment with Teach for America, was fighting for control over her class of thirty-six second-graders. And also fighting for her dignity. For Rhee, the daughter of a physician who grew up in a placid neighborhood in Toledo, raised to always be the best at what she did, this was her first flirtation with failure. And this was no transient failure. On some days that school year, when Michelle would wake up and realize it was another school day, her stomach churned and her body broke out in hives.

On this day, even more than most, absolutely nothing was going right. Rhee had stayed up late the night before making a graphically attractive lesson. She had constructed elaborate props using construction paper and marshmallows and carefully taped tiny magnets to the back of each. The plan: use the marshmallows as hands-on learning tools for a lesson on adding and subtracting. "I had brought in marshmallows for the kids to eat. That was my big bribe." But the first marshmallow slid down the blackboard. Unlike nearly all school blackboards, it turned out, this blackboard was not

magnetized. It was at that very low point, when nobody in the class was listening, nobody was sitting still, nobody cared about construction-paper marshmallows, nobody cared about math, that Rhee looked to some relief from both the heat and her out-of-control class. She opened a window and in flew a big, fat bumblebee.

"Literally, the kids started going nuts," she recalled. "A bee! A bee! A bee! They were running around the room, jumping on the chairs. It was 100 percent chaos. I was trying to settle them down when the bee landed near the air vent, right by the window. I had my rolled-up lesson plan about the marshmallows, which was now no good, and I smacked the bee and then flipped it into my hand—and ate it. It wasn't that bad. I didn't chew. I couldn't feel it moving in my mouth. I just swallowed."

Suddenly, the class drew silent in amazement. For the first time, they realized that their teacher, this diminutive young Korean woman lacking any powers of intimidation, might just be crazy, someone deserving of respect. Swallowing the bee that day didn't solve Rhee's discipline problems. That breakthrough was still months away. But after that day, the students afforded her just a bit of deference, just as they would any potentially crazy person on the street corner.

That evening, carpooling home with Liz Peterson, a roommate who was a Teach for America teacher in a nearby school, Rhee mentioned the fact that she ate a bumblebee that day. Neither thought it was strange. Both were struggling, seeing crazy things, doing crazy things. Said fellow Baltimore TFAer Roger Schulman, "Everything was so insane for her and all of us that first year. The normal boundaries of what one would do just flew out the window. We did whatever we had to do."

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Adrian Fenty, who would appoint Michelle Rhee schools chancellor shortly after taking office in 2007, spent the six years he served on the Washington, D.C., city council (2000–2006) watching a stream of school superintendents pass through the nation's capital. Some fled quickly; they never stood a chance against the naysayers opposing change. School board members, councilmembers, the mayor, the Washington Teachers Union, the special education lawyers, self-styled education "experts" wielding agendas: it was a long list. Others stayed for a sliver of time before moving on; none wrested any real change in the school system that by any measure rivaled Los Angeles for worst-in-the-nation status. Oddly, to many D.C. residents the schools situation seemed acceptable. The District of Columbia Public Schools had proved to be a bountiful employer; the central office alone teemed with hundreds of unneeded workers taking home paychecks but contributing little or nothing to classroom achievement. The dismal academic standings? Conventional wisdom—including, it seemed, at *The Washington Post*—held that race and poverty, not ineffective teaching, explained that embarrassment. Occasionally, the newspaper launched an impressive series on D.C. school boilers not working, a baffling inability to count the number of students within its own system, or teachers absconding with student activities money. But the important issue—whether and why academic achievement in D.C. lagged well behind cities with similar student populations—was rarely explored.

And because some parents had options besides DCPS's failing schools, the system was let off the hook. Independent charter schools pulled in a rapidly growing number of

families; others could apply for "out-of-boundary" schools in better-off neighborhoods. That produced happier parents but only because few were aware that the nicer schools, often dominated by out-of-boundary students from the poorest neighborhoods, were failing, too. Worse, although the out-of-boundary strategy relieved political stress it created two academic landmines. First, it was hard to get parents involved with school activities and conferences when they lived so far away. Second, and far more important, the lack of a district-wide K–12 curriculum truly let down students who scattered to one neighborhood for elementary school, another for middle school, and who-knows-where for high school.[1] In truth, DCPS was a barely breathing school system, impervious to reform. From the sidelines of the council, Fenty, a Howard University–trained lawyer who grew up in the city, witnessed it all. "I had seen really good people come through the school board and have almost no positive impact," he said. "It was all for the same reason: because there was an inability to make tough decisions. Any tough decision that was proposed, no matter who proposed it, would never get the majority of people to support it. . . . The special interests would come out and it would die a quick death."

It wasn't that Fenty felt he had all the answers; it's more that he had instincts about which direction to head in, should he be elected mayor. He had watched Mayor Michael Bloomberg take control of the schools in New York City and Mayor Richard Daley do so in Chicago. "The more I got to know about what they had done, both about the substantive changes they could make in education and the general positive impact that had on the city, I became more and more convinced that D.C. needed to follow suit," said Fenty, who took

office on January 2, 2007. That meant not just seizing control of the schools but also finding a "change agent" like Joel Klein, the former federal prosecutor whom Bloomberg tapped to run the city schools. Klein, an unconventional choice, moved the city's academic indicators upward only by shredding common thinking about how to run an urban school district, such as placing charter schools inside traditional schools, imposing test-based school evaluation systems, taking on teacher work rules deemed sacred by the teachers union, and trying to fire ineffective teachers. To push D.C. toward becoming a world-class city, Fenty needed his own change agent, someone willing to step on toes daily, maybe even hourly, and turn a deaf ear to squeals. Adrian Fenty needed a bee eater.

Chapter One
An (Asian) American Life

One thing many people want to know about Michelle Rhee is who raised this firebrand? The question is understandable. Among Korean immigrants, the appetite for controversial public encounters is nonexistent. Usually, first-generation children of Korean immigrants seek first-class college degrees and settle into quiet suburban lives as doctors and engineers. Yet here we have Michelle Rhee, whose plunge into running D.C. schools generated so much controversy that it landed her on the cover of *Time* and spawned a twelve-part, three-year television documentary on PBS. In the news, we would see dramatic images of a Korean American female facing down the opposition, usually very angry African Americans at least two or three heads taller and a hundred pounds heavier. And yet she never blinked. Again: who raised her?

Michelle's Roots

One day in late spring 2010, Michelle's parents, father Shang and mother Inza, sat side by side on a smallish sofa next to me

at her Washington, D.C., home off 16th Street near the Rock Creek Park Tennis Center. They were midway through one of their many visits to Washington, D.C., from their Colorado retirement home to help care for their granddaughters, Starr and Olivia. What was odd to me was the dynamic between the two of them: Inza, everyone assured me, is the firebrand, the fierce one from whom Rhee inherited her obliviousness to political pain. Yet when I asked about family history, Inza smiled and deferred to Shang, a retired physician, to handle the initial response. Don't be fooled, Michelle cautioned me afterward. Her mother merely was not 100 percent confident speaking in English, especially in an interview. She was nervous she would say the wrong thing. Usually, that's not how they operate. Usually, Inza runs the show.

True enough, the parents agree. Even though Shang does most of the talking during interviews in English, Inza is the steely one, and says she gets it from her father, who "had fire." She is one of six children born to a police officer who later ran a municipal entertainment center and an old-fashioned Korean mother who stayed at home to take care of the children. Inza married Shang and in 1965 they moved to the United States so that he could attend medical school at the University of Michigan, where Michelle was born on Christmas Day, 1969. Then they moved to Rossford, a suburb of Toledo, so that Shang could pursue his specialty of pain management. Inza became a Western-style entrepreneur and opened an upscale dress shop.

Inside their suburban home in Toledo, Inza exercised exacting Korean-style control. She wanted to raise Michelle the way she was raised. She famously sewed her daughter into her prom dress to erase even a suggestion of décolletage (and later

used scissors to get her out), grounded Michelle when her distracted brother Brian faltered in school, because that meant she hadn't helped him enough, and, according to a family friend, dropped Michelle off at Cornell with the parting words, "We didn't bring you to Cornell to get an Ivy League education; we brought you here to find an Ivy League husband."

"My mother was very strict," Inza says. "She didn't let me do anything but study. She didn't let me go to the movies or anything. Just study." Inza's rule-making with Michelle, however, was an East-West cross—Korean tradition melded into a Western "out there" flair arising from her successful business career. It was a potent combination that triggered growing-up traumas for Michelle.

"It's funny because none of my cousins who ended up growing up in Korea were raised that way because in Korea things were changing," said Michelle, who has an older and a younger brother.[1] Her parents, she said, were in a "time warp. I was only allowed out in the evening one night a week and had to be back by 11 p.m. My brothers, however, could do whatever they wanted." Today, Inza laughs at her daughter's memories of the family's double standards. "I'm a Korean mother," she said. "Korean moms are always stricter on girls than boys."

As for sewing up the front and back of Michelle's prom dress while she was in it, Inza did it because it was too low-cut for her liking: "She could wear it or stay home." Then Inza chuckles and adds, "She complained a lot when she was little." Regardless, the childhood tensions appear to have abated and today both would agree with Michelle's observation: "My mom was very strong-willed. I inherited a ton of the way I am from her."

Shang, by contrast, has been the even-tempered intellectual of the family. He reads deeply about science and medicine and has a great sense of humor. Growing up, everyone loved Dr. Rhee, from Michelle's friends to those who worked with him at the hospital. Although Shang and Inza may sound like the classic odd couple, it's obvious they are close. He pursues his intellectual passions while she whirls away taking care of family business. "One time," recalled Michelle, "my dad was sitting on the couch reading the newspaper with the television on. At the same time my mother was buzzing around the house doing fifty million things. Suddenly, she picks up a can of Rogaine and sprays it on his head. And he's sitting there, not moving, while she sprays the Rogaine on him."

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For elementary school, Michelle attended a neighborhood public school, Eagle Point Elementary—"the most vanilla public school you could ever imagine," Michelle said. The family lived in a well-off neighborhood in Rossford, an otherwise working-class city. Today, a drive around Rossford could be included in a documentary about the radical decline of America's manufacturing prowess. The skeletons of hulking factories surrounded by empty parking lots serve as brutal reminders of an economic base that isn't returning. A small sliver of Rossford, however, borders the wide and lazy Maumee River just before it flows into the Maumee Bay of Lake Erie. That neighborhood, entered through stone portals that set it off from the rest of Rossford, is slung close the river. It's the kind of leafy neighborhood, dotted with large, expensive homes where one would expect a successful physician to live with his family. When I visited the

neighborhood, the only people seen on the winding streets were the lawn care workers. The Rhees lived at 261 Riverside Drive until the house burned down a few years ago, Inza and Shang narrowly escaping.

After sixth grade, Michelle followed the family tradition of spending a year in Korea, where she stayed with her aunt and cousin who was a year younger. Every day, she went to school with her cousin. In Ohio, Michelle was the only Korean in her class. In Korea, she was the odd one out again: her Korean vocabulary amounted to what she could absorb at the family dinner table. "It was a tough experience," she said. "The school environment there is so different. There were seventy to seventy-five students per class. We all sat in these little rows and were seated according to height. Since I was taller, I sat in the back with another tall girl. Nobody spoke English, so I just sat there and tried to pick up what I could, but I really didn't understand 90 percent of what was going on."

Rhee's parents and Michelle would agree that the year in Korea was formative. "One thing she learned was closeness of extended family members," Shang said. "I think that was striking to her." Inza agrees that her daughter returned a different person. "Until then, she knew how to read and write Korean, because we sent her to Korean school, but she didn't really speak Korean that well. So she went to elementary school and she had to work really hard. She changed a lot."

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After Michelle returned, Shang and Inza ratcheted up the academic pressure by sending her to Maumee Valley Country Day School, an independent school in Toledo where she followed in the footsteps of her older brother, Erik. Maumee

Valley was the only elite private school in Toledo. Set on seventy-five wooded acres broken up by playing fields and carefully designed academic buildings, all intended to meld into the woods, the 125-year-old school enrolls fewer than five hundred students for grades three through twelve. The tuition, $16,000 in 2010, is modest for this kind of independent school but by far the highest private school tuition in Toledo. The school enrolls many of the sons and daughters from the University of Toledo Medical Center, Bowling Green State University, and University of Toledo. The students are drawn from a city that since the 1990s has been slammed by the implosion of manufacturing. When Maumee Valley graduates go away to college, and all do, they rarely return to Toledo to take jobs and raise a family. "When I do alumni visits, I go up and down the East Coast, up and down the West Coast," said head of school Gary Boehm.

At Maumee Valley, Rhee established herself not as an academic star but as the master organizer. "I was the person who ran everything," she said. "I was not the queen bee or most popular student but I knew who was doing what with whom and I would coordinate everything. I was student council president and all that stuff. I was very well-rounded. I played sports and was the captain of a bunch of teams. I wasn't necessarily the best player. I was more of a leader."

Pete Chung hailed from another Korean American family in Rossford, just down the street. Together, the Rhees and Chungs accounted for the entire Korean American presence in the area. Pete and Michelle became close friends and what Pete, now a venture capitalist in San Francisco, recalls about Michelle is her unflappability and imperviousness to peer pressures. Pete admits to being the typical

teenager—fretting about what people thought of him, trying to act cool. Michelle, by contrast, went her own way. At the end of seventh grade, Pete and Michelle, who were in the same grade together, won permission from the Chung parents to throw an end-of-school-year party. Enormous planning went into the party, especially the guest list. The party was a huge hit, but afterward the Maumee Valley students who didn't get invited were upset and determined to take revenge. "I started getting nasty crank calls," recalled Pete, who became really worried about the fallout and called Michelle to warn her of imminent consequences. Her response: "Ah, screw 'em."

That independent streak extended into the high school years, when Michelle did things many other students would never do, such as carve out close personal relationships with faculty members. Traditional teenage rebelliousness—drinking, smoking, cursing—wasn't a part of Michelle's life. One of her closest friends is Gretchen Verner. In high school, the two of them would go to parties and leave five minutes later when it became clear drinking was the whole purpose of the party.

Twice, they violated their anti-drinking instincts. Neither time turned out well. The first time they decided they needed to vent their anger that much of the senior field hockey team couldn't start the season opener because they had been caught drinking. Marshalling some kind of shaky teenage logic, they decided to seek revenge by drinking themselves. "I made her a rum and Coke," Gretchen recalled. It didn't go well. "Michelle turned bright red." The second encounter with alcohol happened their senior year when Gretchen and Michelle learned they didn't get into their first-choice colleges: Yale for Gretchen, Princeton for Michelle. Now was the time for a traditional high school protest response, they

concluded: let's drink. Problem was, at Michelle's house all they found was a dusty old bottle of Kahlua. Her parents aren't drinkers either. Regardless, they indulged. Again, it didn't turn out well for Michelle and it didn't take that much Kahlua to find out.

Today, Michelle laughs about those memories. "I learned early on that I don't have the tolerance for alcohol," she said. "Some Koreans don't have the enzyme that digests alcohol, so it goes straight to you, even if you take just one sip." As she pointed out, not drinking allows her to keep a demanding schedule that extends well into the night. As D.C. schools chancellor she didn't even begin her treadmill workout until 10 p.m. As for smoking, that experiment didn't last long either. Once, Michelle decided she needed to rebel against her mother, Gretchen recalled, so they bought a pack of cigarettes, drove to the mall where her mother's store was located and smoked. That protest was also short lived.

The Wider World

Michelle repeatedly befriended people unlike her. The first was Jewel Woods. Each year Maumee Valley reached into Toledo's schools and plucked one or two promising minority students. Most of the African American students selected were middle-class blacks. Not Woods, who by his own description was pure street, raised by his grandmother after age eight because of his mother's drug problems. Before applying to Maumee Valley County Day School, he had already dropped out of his public school in Toledo. But through friends Woods had heard about the scholarship openings at the private school and something—to this day he doesn't know what, perhaps some

previously concealed intellectual curiosity—prompted him to apply. His test scores were lousy and his entrance essay was poorly written. But something compelling about the ambition of his essay, "Why black students were never pushed to achieve," and something attractive about his curiosity got him admitted.

Getting admitted, however, was not the same as surviving. "I was a fish out of water," he said. "I had a Jheri curl and a broken front tooth." With a small class, there was no hiding in the back. A poor student with a fear of public speaking and slight stutter, Woods was an unlikely candidate to be befriended by the hyper confident, socially adept Michelle Rhee. And yet he was. The friendship—which included a period of dating—even survived into the third year, when Woods returned to the private school a "militant," the result of attending a summer program for young black achievers. Part of that summer session included a public speaking course, which prepared him to deliver a scorcher of a speech on the opening day of his junior year, a time when students are invited to speak about their summer. Woods delivered a "jaw-dropping" speech about race and class that nobody knew how to deal with; only Michelle remained his friend. "What makes Michelle unique is that for some unbeknownst reason, she's always had the quality of being an old spirit in a young person's body," Woods said. "Michelle was always the person people took their problems to. She always had that quality where she was comfortable with diversity and felt willing to explore race and class."

During his time at the school Woods occasionally accepted rides home from other students. But he never had them drop him off at his actual house, where he lived with his grandmother. It was too embarrassing. "I'd have them

drop me off two or three blocks from my house and then I'd walk home. Michelle Rhee was the only person I ever brought to my house, and she didn't blink." To Rhee, seeing where Woods lived on the west side of Toledo was startling, a universe apart from where Michelle lived on Riverside Drive. "I had never seen anything like it," she said. Today, Woods runs an Ohio-based nonprofit that focuses on men's issues. He and Rhee have maintained their friendship over the years.

Rhee was friends with most of the other African Americans at Maumee Valley, too—something she attributes to being an outsider of sorts herself, the only Korean American student in her 1988 graduating class of fifty-one students. "I lived a very odd life," she said. "I was very much in the mix with rich, white, established people. But I also had a wide range of friends." That mix can be glimpsed in Rhee's senior page, the full yearbook page private schools usually devote to each graduating senior. Rhee's senior page was a weave of old world and new world. The upper left corner is devoted to photos of her female relatives from Korea, including her mother and grandmother. The photo is offset, however, with a hipster caption: "What is this? The Ms. Korea pageant?" There's a photo of a chubby-cheeked Michelle sitting on the hood of a car with her brothers that carries the caption: "Brian and Erik—the two best brothers I could ask for. Thanks for being my friends." The photo at the bottom right shows five boys from her graduating class, most looking highly preppy and bristling with attitude in their jeans, sneakers, ties, and sport coats. They, too, were a part of her world.

Rhee's high school boyfriend, Adam Weiss, was another unlikely choice. Weiss tended toward the sullen side, a sharp contrast to the outgoing Rhee. Over time, the relationship

that had a huge impact on Rhee was with Adam's mother, Mary, who taught at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in Toledo, an inner-city school that was another world apart from Maumee Valley. "She and Adam came to my school one afternoon and Michelle thought it was great," said Weiss. "She came back without Adam to volunteer. She absolutely adored the kids and would read with them. She became a regular." The friendship with Mary kept blossoming, prompted in part by the fact that Adam's sister had died at the age of ten. Michelle, in some ways, became the missing daughter, a regular in the Weiss household. "Adam wasn't much of a talker and Michelle and I would just talk," Weiss said. "I loved it. She was part of the family and she never left." To Rhee, the Weisses were the "idyllic American family," a refreshing contrast to what she viewed as her own overly strict household. Rhee said that volunteer work at Martin Luther King, Jr., along with a summer working with kids on an Indian reservation in Saskatchewan, Canada, explain how she got to where she is today.

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Michelle spent several summers working at Grumpy's, a Toledo sandwich shop. Jeff Horn was born into the hardware business, a job he says made him grumpy. So in the early 1980s he began converting hardware space into a sandwich shop, which he named Grumpy's. In 1986, when a panda exhibit came to the Toledo Zoo, Horn decided to open a Grumpy's annex across the street to feed the crowds. Rhee was one of several high school students he hired and, during the course of that summer, the only one he didn't fire. "He wasn't called Grumpy for no reason," Michelle said. "He

would scream and yell all the time. And fire people all the time. Somebody new would get hired and we would guess how long he or she would last. What I learned from him was that if it's not working out, just fire the person. Be clear with the person and take care of it right away."

During my visit to Grumpy's in summer 2010, I found a far mellower Jeff Horn working the cash register at a nicely appointed lunch restaurant in downtown Toledo, just a short walk from Fifth Third Field, the stadium to the minor league baseball team, the Toledo Mud Hens. He was wearing a tie—"I never saw him wear a tie," said Rhee when I told her about my visit and that Jeff laughed about memories of Rhee. "I never saw that man laugh," she claims, but that's likely shtick. Jeff and his wife, Connie, who worked in the business as a partner, came to Rhee's first wedding.

The part about firing workers, however, is plenty real. In the restaurant business, explained Horn, you go through a lot of workers. "Not all people are created equal," he said. "There are certain jobs you can't put up with inefficiencies. When someone doesn't work out, they're not going to get any better. There isn't any easy way to do it. You cut bait and get it over with." He told Michelle, "You're never going to make a Stradivarius out of knotty pine, so when you want a Stradivarius, get rid of the knotty pine." Horn said Rhee was a "peach" of a worker, a master of multitasking. "She was a machine. Tell her to go and she'd go. You didn't have to manage Michelle."

Restaurant work became a routine for Rhee. In college at Cornell, in Ithaca, New York, she worked for a Japanese restaurant. "I probably spent more time working than I should have," said Rhee. "I paid for my own living expenses; my

parents paid the tuition. I think waiting tables is one of the best things people can do for just general life skills because you have to be with it, you have to learn how to manage."

Years later, when Rhee was married to Kevin Huffman and their daughters were small, the family entered an Original Pancake House restaurant in Toledo. "There's always a wait there," said Huffman. "This time it was a forty-five-minute wait, so they're taking names, but all the people working there were kind of milling around and there were open tables. All the other customers were complaining. At first, Michelle goes over and peeks over the podium to look at the wait list. Then she's sort of looking everything over and wandering around the restaurant. Then she takes over the podium and says to the staff there, 'You, take this family and put them at the four-top there. You, take these guys to the two-top.' They were all following her orders. She cleaned out the backlog in about five minutes. Everyone's seated! It was the funniest damn thing. And the hilarious thing was that the restaurant workers listened. They were like, 'Now here's someone with a plan.'"

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When it came to applying to colleges, Rhee had every extracurricular imaginable and very good grades. But she got turned down by every Ivy League college to which she applied. "See, I'm not book-smart," she said. "I didn't really do great on the SATs. I was in a class of fifty kids, which is not a lot, and they were some of the smartest kids in Toledo. I was always trying to make it to the top 20 percent. Some semesters I'd make it, some I wouldn't." At one point, after losing out at the Ivies, Rhee was leaning toward Miami University of Ohio, which had offered her a scholarship. "It was

my thought that if I was going to go somewhere I didn't want to go, I might as well go for free . . . and my parents said absolutely not." So she went to the more prestigious Wellesley College. Although Rhee's mother is usually the forceful one, in this case it was Shang who stepped in firmly. "I didn't push her to do that [go to Wellesley] but I encouraged her to think bigger." Shang Rhee, who graduated from the prestigious Seoul National University, believed that deepened his aspirations in life and wanted his daughter to experience the same. After one year at Wellesley, Rhee transferred to Cornell University. She was finally in the Ivy League.

At Cornell, her roommate was fellow transfer student Melissa Williams-Gurian. "What's interesting about Michelle is she's hard to read and at least initially, not very warm and fuzzy," Williams-Gurian said. "I remember calling my father and saying my roommate is fine, but I don't think we're going to be friends. But that's just part of who Michelle is. She has a strong exterior and does not allow everyone in. But once in, she's this loving, generous, loyal friend." When Williams-Gurian's father remarried, an event that wasn't going to be easy for her, Rhee showed up to support her friend. "I was like, 'Wow, you're really going to come?'"

One of the first things Williams-Gurian noticed about Rhee was the same thing everyone comments on: she loves nice clothes. In her senior year of high school Rhee was voted "best-dressed." The usual college uniform, jeans and sneakers, weren't her style. "Michelle's closet was full; you can't imagine how full," Williams-Gurian said. "I rarely saw the same outfit twice." Friends from every stage of Michelle's life recall her distinctive look, fashionable but not enslaved to fashion. "She had this incredible closet," said high school friend Gretchen Verner.

"She would have outfits for different seasons and rotate them into her closet," raiding her mother's stash when need be, too. Her friends assumed all those clothes came from her mother's shop because they couldn't recall Rhee ever venturing out to go shopping. She did, but not in the way many women did. "I'm not a shopper in the usual sense of the word," Michelle said. "My mother will go to a place like T.J.Maxx all day and look at everything. I can't do that. I go in and know what I like and am very decisive. If I get the right salesperson, they hit the goldmine. I will buy a ton of stuff all at once and go on." Her current favorite: Nordstrom. Loves the customer service.

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With hindsight, it may strike some as odd that Rhee's initial attraction to Cornell, dating back to her senior year of high school, was the hotel management school there. She had applied but didn't get in. When Rhee transferred to Cornell, she thought she could transfer into the hotel program but her interests soon shifted, due in part to joining a group called Peer Educators in Human Relations. "We would go out and train students how to be more sensitive to diversity," she said. "That was my radical Asian phase. I grew up totally assimilated, essentially thinking I was white. I grew up around white people. That was all I knew. Then when I went to Cornell, I was around lots of other Asian people and other ethnic groups. That is when I sort of noticed who I was." Williams-Gurian recalls long discussions with Rhee comparing their own privileged lives to those less fortunate. "She went through a period of not dating white men."

Rhee ended up majoring in government but when her senior year arrived she had no idea what she wanted to do.

Then she saw a PBS documentary on Teach for America. "I thought it was the greatest thing I had ever seen," she said. "They showed four TFA corps members going through their first year of teaching. It was sad because one of them was really bad and got fired on national TV. And there was the Korean guy who taught science. You could tell he was a great teacher and I thought, 'This is great.'" Rhee went to the information session and then applied. Her sample teaching lesson: how to say *hello* in Japanese, both formally and informally. It must have gone well; she was accepted.

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Everyone who knows Michelle Rhee agrees that a core set of influences answer the question of where this unique person came from. Everything started with Inza's iron will and the compliance and rebellion that triggered, combined with Shang's urges toward community service. In Seoul, surviving in a challenging environment gave her a measure of steel. Volunteering in Mary Weiss's urban Toledo classroom planted in Rhee a possible future. And the "radical Asian phase" at Cornell pushed her to embrace the ambitious and bold. By her senior year in college, the personality of the woman seen trying to transform D.C. public schools was already well formed.

Verner, one of Michelle's oldest friends, has seen Michelle cry only twice. The first was when Gretchen accompanied Michelle to Korea to visit her relatives when they were both twenty. Michelle had become very close to her grandmother and in the cab to the airport for the return trip, Verner looked over and saw tears rolling down her friend's cheeks. They didn't need to speak for Verner to

know that Rhee thought it might be the last time she would see her grandmother.

The second time she saw Michelle cry was on her wedding day in 1996, when, according to Korean custom, Inza gathered all the cash wedding gifts and claimed them as contributions toward the parents' wedding expenditures. That's how it's done in Korea but not in the United States—hence the tears. In years to come, during the worst travails as a newbie teacher in one of Baltimore's most depressing neighborhoods, the stresses of life triggered hives but no tears. A bee eater in the making.