Western Alumni Speak at BASS

By Christen Heaton,
Western Seminary Alumna,
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Over 3 days in March, Western Seminary had seven alumni speak at the Bay Area Sunday School Convention, or BASS as some of you know it. The BASS Church Workers Convention is held on the facilities of Redwood Chapel Community Church, Neighborhood Church and First Baptist Church of Castro Valley, and provides a great opportunity to hear a variety of speakers teach on subjects they are passionate about. Topics can range from relationships, to educational opportunities, to small groups, or how to host a good retreat, all relating back to ministry.

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WINNIS CHIANG

Winnis received an M.A. MFCC (Master of Arts in Marriage, Family & Child Counseling) in 1998. She is a wife, mother, speaker, author, licensed therapist, and teacher.

Christen Heaton: Hi Winnis! Thank you for taking the time to help myself and your fellow alums get to know you and hear about how God is moving in your life. My first question for you is since graduating from Western Seminary, have you been using your degree?

Winnis Chiang: Yes, and in so many ways! Upon graduation in 1998, I started my MFT internship at a community agency with the main focus on counseling students in public schools.

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That same year, I became a full-time Children’s Minister on staff at Chinese Church in Christ, Mountain View and served there until the end of 2004. I became licensed in April 2003 and have been in private practice as a Marriage & Family Therapist ever since. Currently, I have offices in Fremont and Los Altos.

The more I tried to help kids and teenagers in the community and at church, the more I realized the important roles parents and original families play. In 2005, I founded "Parenting ABC" to specialize in helping Mandarin- and Cantonese-speaking parents so they can get along with, enjoy, influence and equip their American-Born Chinese children. Other than providing clinical therapy, I help families to improve marital and parent-child relationships through speaking, training, coaching and writing.

My husband, James, graduated from Western with his M.Div. in 2004 and started serving full-time. My training at Western also helped me better understand, accept and support him as a servant of the Lord.

CH: How would you say God is currently working in your life?

WC: My life verse is Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you …" and our Lord has continued to amaze me with His plan even though my life started on the wrong note. As soon as I was born, my paternal grandmother publicly shared her disappointment that my mom gave birth to another girl. One year later, my dad’s mistress gave birth to a baby boy. In agony and defeat, my mom eventually accepted that she would have to live with the reality of dad’s concubine. I was brought up to be independent, self-sufficient, over-achieving, and well-behaved on the outside; but nobody knew my hunger for love and acceptance inside.

In 1973, I came to the United States for college. Two years later, I married James after only three months of dating. When my "living happily ever after" bubble burst, I became a workaholic in the Silicon Valley. Due to parenting conflicts, my marriage became less and less satisfactory after our son, Scott, was born.

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I became depressed and secretly contemplated a divorce. But by the grace of God, I became a Christian in 1989 when Scott was five. Subsequently, James and Scott were saved in 1990 and 1992, respectively. Who could have imagined the paths ahead of us?

God has worked in amazing ways when we simply followed Him. For example, I was called to serve children after Scott received Christ during our church’s first Vacation Bible School. Later, I became a deaconess in charge of Children’s ministry. While working with kids, the Lord convicted me that there would always be things to do and people to help, but I was the only mother for Scott. As soon as I decided to leave my career to become a stay-at-home mom in 1995, the Lord opened a door to seminary study one night when I unexpectedly attended a performance in Cupertino by the Western Men’s Choir from Portland, Oregon.

There were so many other divine appointments that I would have to write a book to tell you about them. One thing led to another, and I started studying Marriage, Family and Child Counseling at Western Seminary, San Jose. During Scott’s junior high and high school years, I could treat him as top priority while attending seminary and volunteering at church. During practicum, I counseled women and their young children at a Christian residential recovery facility. Upon graduation in 1998, I was appointed as a full-time Children’s Minister on staff in our home church, Chinese Church in Christ (CCIC) in Mountain View, at the time while “Linsanity” Jeremy Lin was growing up there.

I served at CCIC until the end of 2004 after James started serving in San Ramon for a few months. It was hard for me to leave our church of sixteen years, but the Lord had His plan. Not only could I support James, I could also focus more on my private practice and receive whatever the Lord sent my way. Since 2005, I have spoken at churches, retreats and conferences in the United States, Germany, UK, and China. (I have led workshops annually at the BASS convention since 2006.) I have published articles in English and Chinese online, and in newspapers, magazines and compiled books.

In spite of life’s ups and downs, James and I continue to find amazing love in Christ as a couple having FUN, functioning as a team! Between his pastoral ministry in San Ramon (July 2004 to March 2010) and San Jose (continued on next page)
(January 2012 to now), we traveled almost every month to teach and coach at discipleship training conferences with a team (many of whose members are also Western grads). James and I have served together in our family, churches, and in Europe, Asia and the United States. We especially love sharing our experiences with couples and teaching them how to break destructive cycles, rekindle their love, and communicate so that they get the love they really want.

I believe our faith, transparency and vulnerability have also impacted our son. When Scott graduated from Western (M. Div. 2008), I imagined him serving ABCs but God led him to Africa. The Lord spoke clearly to me one day when some concerned parents questioned Scott’s reasoning for taking his young family to the desert. I heard Scott say, “Yes, it is inconvenient. Yes, it could be dangerous... But God’s only Son Jesus Christ came from heaven to earth and we’re just going from one continent to another.” God has rewarded him with a lovely wife who also follows Christ. It is rewarding just watching how they parent their little girl (4) and boy (2). I believe God wants couples to learn from each other and from their children!

CH: Wow, what an incredible journey you have been on. How has graduate training at Western prepared you for the work you are now doing?

WC: I graduated from U.C. Berkeley in 1976 with a B.Sc. in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science and worked for 19 years in the Silicon Valley. After being a Christian for six years, I left my career as a software development manager in 1995 to be a stay-at-home mom. Being relatively young in faith and with no prior training in psychology, Western provided the initial education, training and experience on my path to be a minister, a licensed MFT, and a pastor’s wife!

CH: Is there anything else that you’d like other alums to know about what you are currently doing in your ministry and career?

WC: It is my calling to share Biblical principles and real-life practical applications that allow couples to grow in understanding, friendship, intimacy, and partnership in Christ. While I’m still busy with counseling and coaching, I am focusing more on training and writing to help more couples and families. I also love spending time with family and friends (especially singing with my 90-year-old mother-in-law, and playing with my grandchildren). I am writing a book about the redeeming love, grace and truth that continue to transform my family moment by moment with hope, help and healing in Christ.

I worship at Friendship Agape Church in San Jose and enjoy serving with James in worship, Bible studies, small groups and fellowships. Currently, I work with family ministries and discipleship training. We will be expanding our Heart2Heart ministry for couples and young families and would love to mentor Western Seminary students and alums. Come join us!

CH: Winnis, thank you for taking the time to share your story with myself and your fellow alums. It is wonderful to hear of how God is moving in your life, personally and professionally, right now. It is so exciting to hear that you want to continue to be a part of the Western Seminary San Jose community by mentoring current students! What a gift that will be.

Audit a Class for Free!
Alumni can take one eligible course per academic year free as an audit course, including Introduction to Coaching (MCS 510). You need only complete a Non-Credit Application form and the Alumni Audit Opportunity and submit them to Carrie Priest, Student Services Coordinator. Email her at carrie_priest@westernseminary.edu or call her at 408.356.6889 x 405.