

ELLEN LEE

The first thing to know about Ellen Lee, a 1992 Case graduate, is that she considers herself unworthy of this profile, because she believes she has yet to accomplish anything extraordinary. Born in Taiwan, she grew up in the Cleveland suburb of Lyndhurst and attended Case with the encouragement of her parents, alums Chin-ho Lee (GRS '66 and '70, chemistry) and Su-yin Lee (GRS '68, chemistry). During her first two years as an undergraduate, she majored in management, psychology, and music before finally settling on computer engineering. Like so much that Ms. Lee puts her hand to, this choice worked out well for her. After inaugurating her career with a couple of California firms, such as HP, she founded her own company, brokered its sale to a larger enterprise, and took time off to have a daughter, Alicia, now sixteen months old. Today she works as an operations program manager at Google. Is she worthy? Read on.

I was a typical freshman: not sure what I wanted to do.

I found I was naturally tutoring people in computer science, which I wasn't even taking, because I'd tested out of it. It was easy for me—very natural.

In my computer engineering classes, I was usually the only woman. Maybe, at most, there would be two of us in class. It's been nice out here, once you're working, to see that there are a lot of women in the profession.

One of the great things about being in the computer industry is that the culture really encourages innovation. When I'm hiring someone, I look for a person who asks why—who doesn't accept things the way they are.

A person who really inspires me is Steve Jobs at Apple.

Success for me on the management side is all about communication.

You have to build relationships with people so that you can communicate why the project that you're working on is important. If you don't build a relationship with someone, you'll never know what motivates them. I

can say, "This will save the company a lot of money," and they could respond, "So what?"

It's amazing having a daughter and watching her grow up. She's at the age where she learns something new every day.

Music inspires me. I used to go to concerts every other week. You really get that energy from great musicians in live performances.

During the dot.com boom of 1999, I quit my job and started my own business, which was called SoInviting.com. The inspiration came from a website I designed in 1998 as part of our wedding. My husband and I put together information about the two of us and our families, and had information about the area for out-of-town guests. We even sent many of our friends invitations with links to the website, so they could RSVP online. People kept looking at it and saying, "Wow! We've never seen anything like this."

The dot.com bust was, I think, the market's realization that companies need to make profits.

I really felt like we were doing something in those days. What kind of hours was I working? A lot. Married but no children. My husband and I were working 10 to 12 hours a day. He was also at a dot.com.

The people that you work with affect how you work. When they're putting in 100 percent, it motivates you. And when they're excited about what they're doing, it changes the way you feel about work.

Google seemed like something that had been created for me.

The company motto is "Don't be evil." Really, it's something that you can apply to almost every decision you make. Like, "Should I do this? Well, I shouldn't be evil, right?" If you're managing a project, you could easily say, "It's not my problem. I'm just going to let it burn up down the road."

I try to go for the big win. But I'll take the little ones, too.

I know plenty of people who have good ideas and never do anything with them. I'm a person who will try things.

If I were asked to address your graduating class, I would say, "Go after your dream. Get to know yourself and what drives you and inspires you, and go for that. Life is too short to just do what society expects, if it's not the right thing for you. And don't be discouraged by failure, because that's a learning experience that makes you better." ☒

As told to Stuart Kollar

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