Clara Shih was 29 when Starbucks asked her to join its board of directors. She had already written a bestseller and raised $21 million for her social media startup, yet she was intimidated.

Why wouldn’t she be? She was replacing Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s chief operating officer who would soon publish, *Lean In,* a book that changed the conversation about women in corporate America. Other board members were executives who run multi-billion-dollar companies, venture capitalists, a former senator, and a former secretary of defense.

“I was the youngest person there by a decade, and I was incredibly intimidated,” said Shih. “I’ve been intimidated my whole life. But every time I rise to the occasion—or not—I grow from it and shoot for the next thing.”

The board recruited her because it wanted someone who understood social media and digital technology. Her perspective as a woman, an Asian, and a millennial (which represents a huge chunk of Starbucks customers) was a bonus.

It was not what she had expected. Members were open to new ideas and probing questions. “After the first few board meetings, they even urged me to speak up more,” she said.

What really surprised her, however, was the board’s belief that for-profit companies have a responsibility to make the world a better place.

“They were all about leadership, not just for the organization, but for society as well,” Shih said. “I knew they were forward-thinking, but I was surprised how authentic and how deeply rooted that belief was. For many companies, corporate social responsibility is more of a PR tactic. At Starbucks, it’s the heart and soul of the company.”

Not a Natural Leader

Shih, herself, was not a natural leader. She was elected to Tau Beta Pi at Stanford University, where she graduated at the top of her class with a B.A. and M.S. in computer science. She had shot up the ranks at Google and Salesforce, then launched a business-oriented social media company, Hearsay.

“When I started hiring employees, they expected me to be leader,” she said. “I had to step up. There’s no forced leadership like being an entrepreneur. It might be your company, but your employees are fully invested. They’ve taken the full risk. That makes me responsible for them and their families.”

That responsibility changed Shih: “I went from conflict-avoidant, growing up to embracing conflict before becoming more of a facilitator. Like Goldilocks and the Three Bears, I’m trying to find the right space in between.”

Shih’s story began in Hong Kong, where her father was a math professor and her mother taught art. They emigrated to Chicago when she was four.

The family struggled to earn a living, learn English, and fit into their new country. Her father became an engineer. Her mother returned to school for a degree in special education.

Shih went to elementary school. Since it had no program for non-English speakers, it placed her in a class of students with speech impediments. The constant repetition of sounds and words is why she has no noticeable accent, she said.
Her early years molded her thinking.

“Growing up in an immigrant family makes you grow up fast,” she said. “My parents didn’t speak the language, it was hard economically, and as I grew up, I wanted to contribute to the family.

“That translated into a desire for social justice. I know what it’s like to not have money, privilege, or any power. I was always grateful for the opportunities afforded to me, and I want to make sure others have the same opportunities.”

Her ambition gained momentum when she was admitted into the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (IMSA), a public three-year boarding school located in the Chicago suburbs. IMSA is a top high school for students interested in science and technology and a hotbed of future entrepreneurs. Its graduates include the founders of PayPal, YouTube, Yelp, SparkNotes, and OK Cupid, as well as technologists who worked at many leading internet firms.

“I felt like I had these role models and a ready-made network of people that I could learn from when I moved to California,” Shih said. “It didn’t seem so strange to start a company because I had seen all of them do it.”

The school was a meritocracy and Shih excelled. She became captain of the women’s varsity tennis team, concert mistress of the orchestra, editor of the student newspaper, and captain of the debate team. At 15, she spent a summer programming at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory. And she gave English lessons to immigrants.

“I rarely slept for more than five hours in high school,” she recalled. “But the great thing about my school was that it gave us a lot of autonomy. I knew what I wanted to get done academically, and I had many degrees of freedom to do it.”

The Meanest People She Had Ever Met

She made friends who are still close to this day. And she discovered some of the meanest people she had ever met.

“I was brutally bullied in my senior year,” Shih said.

In many ways, all the ingredients were there. IMSA was a pressure cooker. It was filled with bright, competitive, academic achievers who all lived together. Everyone knew who got into their top college choices and who did not. Those interested in venting their frustrations had the brains to do it in the nastiest possible ways.

Shih became a target. There were slights and rumors. A student published an op-ed in the school paper that called Shih the devil. Many students thought it was hilarious and that it put her in her place. Shih felt alone and started to spiral into depression.

Her friends stopped it from going any further. A handful of students stood up for her against the bullies.

“Talk about leadership,” Shih said. “That’s a hard thing to do when you’re 17.”

Research shows one out of seven students experiences bullying in school, said Shih, who actively supports anti-bullying programs.

“All it takes is one person or a small number of people
who are true friends to stand up. That’s the difference between bad outcomes and people getting through it and becoming more resilient. I found out who my true friends were, and I got through it by developing tremendous grit and self-confidence,” she said.

Shih entered Stanford looking for a fresh start. She also had an agenda: she wanted to learn software engineering and work at a startup.

“Stanford mints entrepreneurs,” she said. “I had friends a few years ahead of me and they were already starting companies. I was surrounded and inspired by alumni. Larry Page, who co-founded Google, lectured our computer science class. Visits like that were an everyday thing on campus.”

Shih threw herself into her work, but her experience at IMSA made her think about how she could help other people. She worked with students in poorer communities after class, and founded a nonprofit, Camp Amelia Technology Literacy Group, that created software to improve basic education in underserved communities.

She spent a year in Beijing doing field research for her honors thesis. In her senior year, she was named one of 10 Mayfield Fellows, a program that Shih calls “a mini-MBA on how to start a company.”

Highly-structured Classes

The highly structured classes and internships taught her valuable business skills, from creating a cash flow statement to speaking in public. It also introduced her to an ecosystem of entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, and potential employers and partners.

Shih graduated at the top of her class, completing her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in computer science in four-and-a-half years. She received a Marshall Scholarship to earn a master’s in internet studies at Oxford University starting in the fall, leaving her six months to do as she pleased.

She joined the tight-knit Bay Area community of Marshall and Rhodes Scholar alumni. At a winter event, Shih met Shona Brown, head of corporate strategy at Google. Brown offered her an internship until she left for Great Britain.

“As I got into it, I found I liked the team and the work,” she said. “Google continued to employ me in the U.K. and hired me when I returned to the United States. “I was the youngest person there by 10 years and the only one without a business degree, but I just worked hard. There was no job too small, so I was looped into a lot of projects.”

It was a great job, yet she left: “I lived in San Francisco and loved it. There was something new every night and there were lots of exciting people. Despite working hard, I strived to have a work-life balance. The commute to Google’s headquarters in Silicon Valley crushed my day. I stopped exercising and seeing my friends. I was becoming burned out at 23, so I had to find a job in the city.”

Working with Google’s sales team, Shih discovered customer relationship management (CRM) software
which helps manage interactions with customers.

“I didn’t learn about it at college, but it is the biggest, most important category of enterprise software,” she said.

That’s where she decided she wanted to be. She applied to Salesforce, a CRM leader, for a job in corporate development “because it sounded like strategy.” She did not get the job, but her resume caught the eye of the head of product marketing.

“I didn’t know what that was, but it turned out to be my calling,” Shih said. “It sits at the intersection of engineering, new products, customers, and sales. It’s about connecting the dots, listening to the market, and translating its feedback into what gets built.”

Within three years, she rose from associate product manager to running a major product, Salesforce’s app exchange. That happened just as social media was starting to take off.

Sales teams were beginning to use the new Facebook site to find customers and identify shared common interests. At a friend’s request, she coded an app, Faceforce, which saved that Facebook data as part of a Salesforce contact record. Her friend told his friends and customers and news spread.

Suddenly, Shih was on the map. At 25, Shih was a pioneer of social media selling. Journalists interviewed her. She was invited to speak at conferences. She was flooded with emails. Her book, The Facebook Era: Tapping Online Social Networks to Build Better Products, Reach New Audiences, and Sell More Stuff, became a bestseller.

“I pitched my boss on the idea of building out Faceforce and monetizing it,” Shih said. “He thought it was a terrible idea. He thought Facebook was for kids, and it was going away like MySpace.”

So, at 27, she left Salesforce and started Hearsay with Steve Garrity, a Microsoft product developer and another Mayfield Fellow. Within two years, they had raised $21 million in venture funding and added another $30 million in 2013.

Evolved Over Years

Hearsay has evolved over the years. Shih launched it as a general social media sales platform. Today, Hearsay caters to insurance and financial professionals, using sophisticated artificial intelligence to track social media and market services.

Shih has also changed. As Hearsay grew to 100 and then more than 200 workers, she moved from a hands-on leader to executive. Her understanding of leadership changed too.

“It’s hard to put a finger on what leadership really means,” Shih said. “Right now, I think you have to bring people together and rally them around an important cause that’s bigger than any individual. If you do that, you make people better in the process.”

Her experience on the Starbucks board also taught her what it means to be an authentic leader: “Because I grew up fast and was always the youngest person on my team or role, I unconsciously put a barrier between the work version of myself and personal version of myself.

“What I learned at Starbucks is that you can be the same person and make leadership deeply personal. It’s more sustainable. A lot of this is around trusting and creating trust from others, feeling comfortable being vulnerable, and bringing your whole self to work and to everything you do.”

Quite a transformation for someone who was intimidated much of her life.

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