

# Village roots, global vision: Thunderbird at ASU grad charts purpose-driven path

By Mary Hess, ASU News  
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**Editor's note:** This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2025 graduates](#).

Yuuki Sasao-Ruef's experience with [Thunderbird School of Global Management](#) at Arizona University started long before she began pursuing her degree.

"I worked for HR Institute Inc., a consultation company in Tokyo, for three years," Sasao-Ruef, a native of Fukuoka, Japan, said. "It was founded by a Thunderbird Class of '91 alumna who became an incredible mentor to me. Her support and example inspired me to become a T-bird myself."

That inspiration led her to Thunderbird, where she encountered perspectives far beyond anything she'd experienced before.

"Before Thunderbird, I thought I had a global view. I worked in New York City and Tokyo and lived in hotels across the U.S. for work," said Sasao-Ruef, who is Thunderbird's Outstanding Graduate Student this spring.

"But I realized how small my world really was. My thinking was very Western-centric. I assumed things outside my scope were about competence, when in fact, competency is useless unless people are on the same page. Our current challenges are more about not being able to get on the same page, though the world — including me — seems to focus on competency and available resources."

This internal shift wasn't always easy as she pursued her [Master of Global Management](#) degree.

"I was constantly challenged in the way I think and collaborate with others," she said. "At first, it was frustrating but eventually, it was liberating. I was growing."

After graduation, Sasao-Ruef will temporarily relocate to temples in Thailand and India to become a monk, a dream she's held since 2020.

“I’m so excited — this is something I’ve wanted to do for years,” she said.

Sasao-Ruef’s drive stems from a place of deep gratitude and personal history. Coming from a village in Japan that experienced systemic discrimination for generations, she’s carried her family’s resilience with her across borders and into new futures.

“My grandfather had to support his family at the age of 8,” Sasao-Ruef said. “I only made it to community college in Buffalo, New York, with very limited English because my mother let me use her fund for my education. Everyone in my village was against me leaving, so I pretended I was applying to local schools, then told them I hadn’t applied to any after the deadlines had passed.”

That leap and sacrifice changed everything for Sasao-Ruef.

“I shocked my entire family and neighbors,” she recalled. “But I think I’ve proved that my decision wasn’t wrong.”

Now as she looks ahead to an exciting future, she remains motivated by a desire to give back.

“My journey has been filled with crazy luck and warm people,” she said. “Now, I want to reallocate the extra gifts I’ve received to the people around me. My life has been shaped by others’ kindness — especially when I had nothing. I’m most grateful for people.”

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



## Gallery



Sasao-Ruef (back, center) and fellow T-birds — seven different people representing six different countries — on a hike in South Mountain, posing as cacti.





Sasao-Ruef in Rwanda with local business women during her Thunderbird Global Challenge Lab capstone, where they shared candid conversations exchanging their life perspectives.



Sasao-Ruef with her partner, Brad, who visited from Portland, Oregon, on a hike in South Mountain.





Sasao-Ruef (third from right) with classmates at the Heard Museum.





Sasao-Ruef (center) with two of her closest friends connecting at the Pub at Thunderbird.