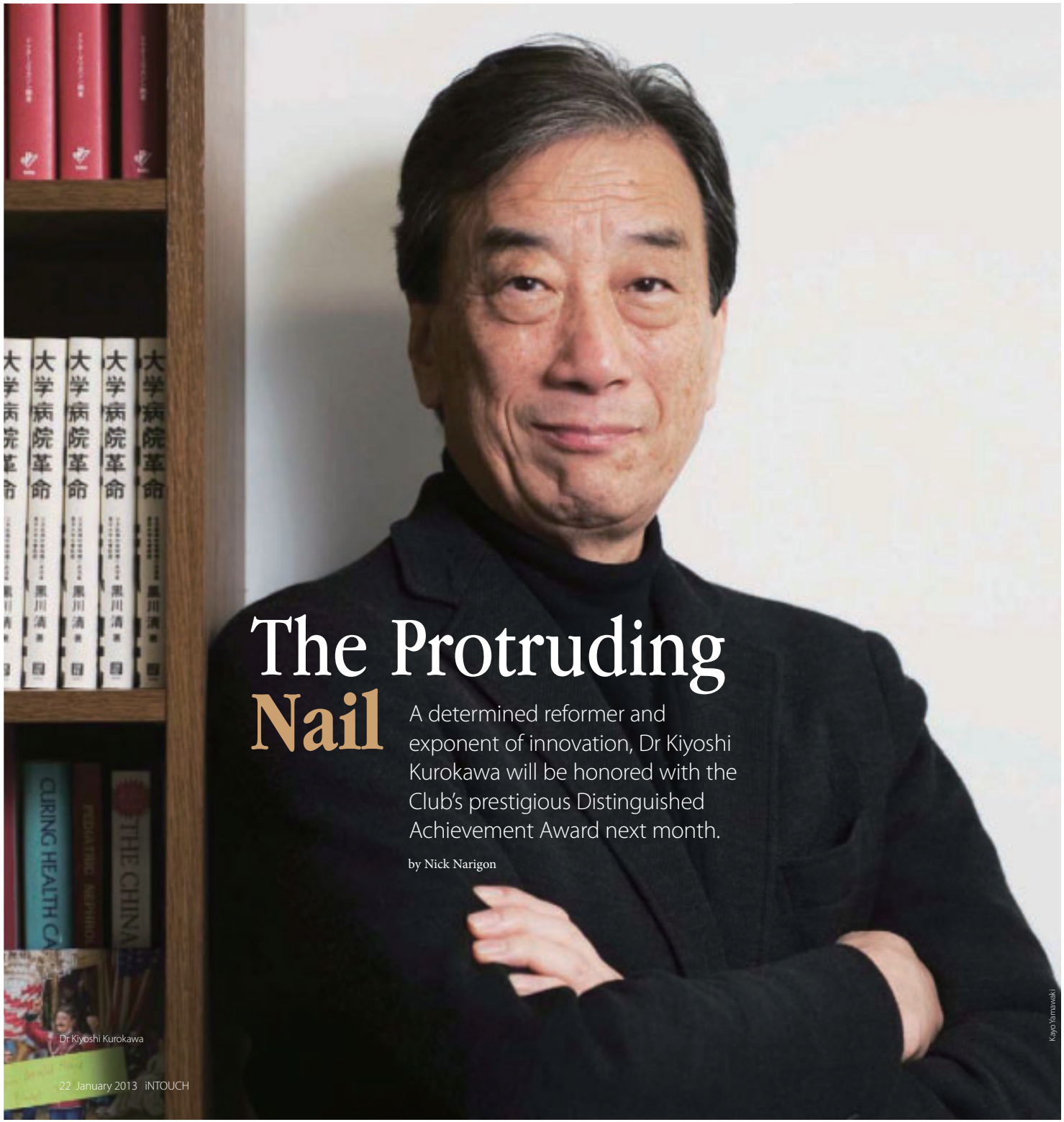

Dr Kiyoshi Kurokawa

Kayo Yamawaki

The Protruding Nail

A determined reformer and exponent of innovation, Dr Kiyoshi Kurokawa will be honored with the Club's prestigious Distinguished Achievement Award next month.

by Nick Narigon

Rather than returning to his privileged life in Tokyo, a spirited Japanese doctor found himself struggling to set up a tent somewhere outside Bismarck, North Dakota. It was 1971, and 34-year-old Kiyoshi Kurokawa was on his way to start a research job in Los Angeles.

He was heading down a career path that was to be marked by frequent collisions with convention. The maxim he followed then—and still espouses today—is that limits should be tested and new ground must always be broken. "Be the nail that sticks out," says Kurokawa, referring to the Japanese proverb that says that those who stand out will be forced to conform.

The walls of his fourth-floor office at the National Graduate Institute of Policy Studies in Roppongi are lined with shelves of well-worn magazines and books on a range of subjects, from environmental studies to European art. A copy of Walter Isaacson's biography of the founder of tech company Apple, Steve Jobs, sits in a bookcase; another copy lies on his desk.

"Steve Jobs, for example, said you should be a compass [and] navigate through life," says Kurokawa. "Everybody knows what they want to become, but some people are not realizing it. Life is not a map, it's a compass to navigate you where you want to go. Don't settle. Keep looking. There is no map."

A spry man of 76, whose youthful looks belie his age, Kurokawa has spent years campaigning for reform in education and government policy. Most recently, he led an independent inquiry into the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant crisis that unfolded in the days and weeks after the earthquake and tsunami of March 2011.

For such work, the Club will bestow upon Kurokawa its Distinguished Achievement Award next month. "The Distinguished Achievement Award is given to individuals who have made noteworthy contributions to society," says Jeff McNeill, a member of the committee that selects the award recipients. "In particular, the award recognizes efforts to improve international relations, as well as the interchange of culture among countries."

Previous awardees include renowned scholars Donald Keene and Edward Seidensticker, former astronaut Mamoru Mohri, former sumo champion Konishiki and Sadako Ogata, who served as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for 10 years.

"Dr Kurokawa's career has been dedicated to improving the lives of people," McNeill says. "His tireless efforts to help promote a safer and healthier society in Japan and globally has earned him numerous recognitions from around the world, including the Order of Purple from the Japanese government for academic achievement."

Accolades, of course, are nothing new to Kurokawa. He has received the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star from the Japanese government, and Washington, DC-based *Foreign Policy* magazine named him as one of its top 100 global thinkers of 2012.

While grateful for the Club recognition, Kurokawa is his notoriously humble self

Kurokawa teaching at the University of Tokyo (1980s)

Kurokawa (third from left) on the panel of the Pacific Health Summit, Seattle (2008)

when discussing his worthiness. "I don't know what to say, just thank you," he says. "I ask why is the award given at the end of the year? Because if I get the award, I would like to do something for the organization. What can I do? Maybe increase membership by campaigning? If I recruit a new Member, maybe I can get a commission."

Joking aside, Kurokawa's penchant for bucking the system didn't emerge until he was in his 30s. The eldest son of a respected doctor, he grew up in Tokyo during the 1940s and '50s. As such, his duty was to follow in his father's footsteps. So, while his two younger brothers went into engineering, Kurokawa enrolled in the University of Tokyo in 1956. Six years later, he earned his MD from Todai's School of Medicine. Specializing in internal medicine, he became an expert in the field of nephrology.

Despite speaking little English and being virtually broke, in 1969 Kurokawa took a research position at the University of Pennsylvania, where he found the different approach to research to his liking. "In Japan, you are stuck in one institution and it is seniority based," he says. "The US was more fitting to my sort of, I don't know, psyche."

Rather than complete assignments as instructed by his superiors, Kurokawa was told by his mentor to conduct independent research and develop his own hypotheses. He was encouraged to voice his own opinions during discussions and to actively question. "That was very shocking," he says. "Even though he was the professor chair and I was just a fellow, we were equal. I was told to question from my expertise. That was an eye-opening experience."

> "He was the first and last science adviser to two prime ministers. You have to be charismatic to do that, but, more to the point, you have to say some pretty tough things."

Once his tenure was up at UPenn, Kurokawa decided to continue his nephrology studies on the other side of the country, at UCLA. But first, with little money to spare, Kurokawa rented a truck and toured the United States for two weeks. Driving more than 300 kilometers a day, he would stop off along the way to camp with his wife, Keiko, and their young son, Atsushi. "[That was a great experience, camping," he says. "[Those were] the good old days."

After five years at UCLA and the birth of his daughter, Tomoko, Kurokawa realized he had "broken the code," and it was too late to return to Tokyo without having to start his career from square one. To improve himself and to escape the life of a researcher, Kurokawa spent two grueling years obtaining his California medical license.

With another MD and board certifications in hand, he took a position at the University of Southern California, home to the largest medical center west of the Rockies. "It was fortunate because so many friends supported me and helped me," he says. "I was offered a job at some other places, but I chose to stay in LA. My mission was to survive in the US until my kids finished college."

Returning to UCLA, the newly promoted professor of medicine bought a large house with a swimming pool in Encino. He thought he had discovered happiness. Then, in 1983, the University of Tokyo came calling. "At that time, even in the early 1980s, for the University of Tokyo to consider a professor from abroad, it was still taboo," Kurokawa says. "But my friend came to my house to persuade me to give it a try."

With his wife, son and "Valley girl" daughter in tow, Kurokawa returned to his alma mater and a home in Tokyo that Kurokawa says was in "shambles." His lab space was minuscule and the course offerings were slim, but the students showed promise.

"I began to realize that it was such a joy to have such bright kids and bright future doctors to teach," he says. "I began to think that education is really my mission. Awakening students, opening their eyes: that is the reason why I stayed in Japan, despite this stupid, small house."

After five years, during which time Kurokawa expanded the curriculum and established an exchange program with Harvard, he was named chair of the university's Department of Medicine. Still, many of his reforms were being stymied in faculty meetings. Frustrated, in 1996 Kurokawa accepted an invitation to become dean of medicine at Tokai University, where he encouraged juniors to study abroad and introduced technology into the classroom.

Much to his surprise, Kurokawa was elected president of the Science Council of Japan in 2003. "I never expected this because I was always considered strange and unorthodox compared to the ordinary Japanese academics," he says. "But at that time, there was a transition with the Japanese government. Many agencies were under target of the government, including the Science Council."

His work building a strong network of contacts in the global science community was rewarded with a position as Japan's first science adviser to the government in 2006. In his new role, Kurokawa developed Innovation 25, an initiative designed to stimulate scientific research and boost economic growth by 2025. The position was eventually scrapped two years later.

Now an academic fellow at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (he is also chair of the Health and Global Policy Institute), Kurokawa was in the media spotlight again following the Tohoku disaster in 2011.

In the immediate aftermath, he smoothed the way for foreign doctors to aid in the recovery efforts. Later, he turned his attention to the handling of the situation at Tokyo Electric Power Company's (TEPCO) stricken nuclear plant.

"When Fukushima happened, I knew

that it held global relevance. When it comes to nuclear power, everybody wants to know what is happening. In that case, the government usually commissions an independent commission. Japan never has," Kurokawa says. "It was on the news everywhere—TEPCO, the Japanese government, the Japanese press—and you immediately feel they are not telling the truth. They are hiding something, no? When politicians say don't worry, people start to worry."

In December 2011, the Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission, headed by Kurokawa, began its examination of the triple meltdown and the way in which it was handled. It was Japan's first-ever such independent parliamentary inquiry.

"At the opening, I said the sense of mission is three words: people, future and world," says Kurokawa. "I said 'people' because this is a commission of the people, by the people and for the people. And second is 'future' because to see the future of our nuclear plants we have to study the past. By studying the past and looking through the current window, we can see a better future. And the third is 'world' because the world is concerned about this accident. We need to share our lessons with the rest of the world."

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Without staff, computers or phones at first, Kurokawa brought in his longtime friend and entrepreneur William Saito to help jumpstart the commission's efforts. He also insisted on total transparency. Each hearing was streamed online and access was granted to all members of the media, not just the Japan press club.

"We did a lot of groundbreaking things in how organizations are created, in how things are bought, how things are structured," says Club Member Saito. "How do you get over 100 people, strangers, together in one room to work on a common mission that only lasts for six months? That is completely insane. It was Kurokawa's leadership that got this thing done."

Saito says that Kurokawa was determined to protect the impartiality of the commission and reminded members that the inquiry was not a bully pulpit or a soap box for individual agendas. "I think this panel could have easily underdone something or overdone something, and to get it done just right, that kind of leadership is extremely hard to do, in Japan especially," says Saito.

Delivered to the government last July, the commission's 641-page report deemed the catastrophe "man-made" and criticized both the Japanese government and TEPCO. For example, Kurokawa says, US recommendations on how to deal with operational problems, natural disasters and even a terrorist attack had been ignored.

Although the commission has been disbanded, Kurokawa continues to share its findings. "My primary mission at the moment, among many things, is to convey the message of this report," says Kurokawa. "This [report] is the foundation of a functioning democracy. This is the first time it is working. This changing world requires more transparency, accountability. You cannot hide."

Kurokawa's work with the commission has already been recognized. Next month, he will receive the American Academy for the Advancement of Science 2012 Scientific Freedom and Responsibility Award for his "remarkable stewardship" of the Fukushima investigation and his "courage in challenging some of the most ingrained conventions of Japanese governance and society."

Not a man to stand still for long, Kurokawa continues to work with young people and encourage entrepreneurs through organizations like Impact Japan and TEDxTokyo. He also still campaigns for global health policy reform and next month he will lead the Japanese contingent at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

"You got to realize that the guy is a medical doctor, right? He knows how to run organizations; he knows how to play politics," Saito says. "He was the first and last science adviser to two prime ministers. You have to be charismatic to do that, but, more to the point, you have to say some pretty tough things. You have to be fair and honest about it. It's very hard to argue against these points because he's not doing it out of any self-interest. He's not doing it out of any motives. He just wants to better the place here." □

Kurokawa (far right) with fellow researchers at UCLA (1977)

Kurokawa with Michio Furukawa, the mayor of Kawamata City, Fukushima Prefecture (2011)

Narigon is a Tokyo-based freelance journalist.

Distinguished Achievement Award Presentation Ceremony
Monday, February 18
6:30–8:30 p.m.
Washington and Lincoln rooms
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