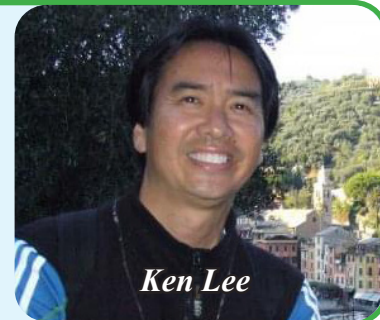


# Interview With Susan Polgar

Ken Lee



Ken Lee

**S**usan Polgar is a legend in the chess world. As a top player, coach, author, and creator of SPICE and the Susan Polgar Foundation, her intelligence, enthusiasm and love of the game have inspired millions.

**Ken:** Can you tell me how SPICE (Susan Polgar Institute for Chess Excellence) <https://www.webster.edu/spice/index.php> came to be?

**Susan:** The idea for SPICE was born in 2005 when I visited Lubbock, Texas as part of my national tour after the success at the 2004 Olympiad in Calvia.

I had just won two gold and two silver medals including the team silver with the US team. I was invited to visit Texas Tech University by Dr. Hal Karlsson who was the faculty advisor for the chess club.

Dr Karlsson thought it would be great if we could create a chess program like UT Dallas and UMBC (University of Maryland, Baltimore County).

**Ken:** What was the initial mission for SPICE?

**Susan:** In those days, most young chess players in the United States progressed from elementary, middle and high school with some small form of support from their chess community.

Once they got to university, however, there was no real outlet for students to simultaneously continue their chess and academic education.

My dream for SPICE was to create that outlet and opportunity for top young players, in the US and around the world, to be able to receive top notch education while enhancing their chess skills. I knew it would not be easy, but I believe in the quote from the famous movie Field of Dreams, "If I build it, they will come". And so we did. For the next 14 years at Texas Tech and Webster University, literally every student we had reached

their rating peaks because of SPICE.

But it was not easy. We had to start completely from scratch. We had to buy all new chess boards, sets and books. We started with just about half a dozen or so casual chess players.

**Ken:** What kind of progress did you have in those early years?

**Susan:** In the first year, we had an amateur team with club players. In the second year, we added one International Master. Through a lot of hard work, we finally built a division one team by our third year and made the Final Four for the first time, finishing third.

By year four and five, we became national champions, dethroning the unbeatable UTD and UMBC.

Then, unfortunately support for the program began to wane due to massive changes in the university administration. The university had new President, Provost, and Senior Vice Provost. Everyone who was involved in bringing us to Texas was no longer at their positions. The new brass did not understand the importance of SPICE and did not offer support.

**Ken:** How did you adapt to the change in circumstances?

**Susan:** When we informed the new administration at Texas Tech that if we do not receive proper support, our students could not even finish their degrees. They refused to budge. Then we asked for permission to speak to other universities to relocate SPICE. We were laughed at and told to go ahead, but expect no university to invest in an elite "chess" program. They were wrong. As soon as we started to initiate a nationwide search and looked for new opportunities

*"I like to say the only constant in life is change. Chess trains young people to make good choices in the game of life."*

for our students, seven other universities immediately showed interests. We did our due diligence by visiting different campuses and met with the heads of these universities.

At the end, we selected Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri because we felt that it was the best fit and our students would have the most support. We moved the SPICE program there in 2012 and we continued where we left off at Texas Tech by dominating College Chess for years to come.

**Ken:** What was the transition like?

**Susan:** It was easier to make a transition than to start from scratch because most of the top players agreed to move to Webster. We were also fortunate because SPICE had already established an excellent reputation. On our A and B team, we had GMs Georg Meier (Germany), Anatoly Bykhovsky (Israel), Andre Diamant (Brazil), Denes Boros (Hungary), and IM Vitaly Neimer (Israel) coming over from Texas Tech. At Webster University, we also immediately added GMs Ray Robson (USA, Wesley So (Philippines), Manuel Leon Hoyos (Mexico), and Fidel Corrales (Cuba).

Therefore, from day one at Webster, we had the number one ranked team in the nation, and we retained the number one ranking for ten consecutive years (under my leadership and they are still the number one ranked team today).

During my tenure at Webster, our students won more World Championships, National Championships, Olympiad Gold and Major Titles than ALL other chess programs in the US, COMBINED! What I am also very proud of is our students during these 14 years in Texas and St.

Louis maintained an average GPA of 3.5 – 3.8/4 every semester while College Chess only requires a 2.0. I did not accept any student who was not committed to academic and chess excellence.

Eventually, I retired and left recommended the Director position and Head Coach to my former student: Vietnamese GM Liem Le. I'm very proud of what he has accomplished, and he's been an exemplary student and leader in the chess community.

**Ken:** What kind of programs does SPICE implement today?

**Susan:** As I mentioned earlier, in addition to being the number one ranked collegiate team in the nation for over 12 straight years and counting, we still have a lot of outreach programs to the community. We hosted many summer camps. Webster University became the first in the US to offer a Minor in Chess program.

[https://news.webster.edu/2022/chess\\_minor.php](https://news.webster.edu/2022/chess_minor.php)

**Ken:** You are one of the top chess coaches in the world. Have you identified attributes of great chess coaches and students?

**Susan:** I think it is crucial that coaches have a passion for the game and have 100% discipline. I also believe that they need to be flexible from student to student because I don't believe in a one-size-fits-all approach.

The best coaches have to be willing, ready and able to modify their approach based on the needs of the students. A great coach has to be passionate and dedicated.

I think the success of SPICE has always been that we treated our students like family. We did a lot of things together like celebrating holidays and birthdays. We went on team building activities like apple picking, escape room events, and hiking, etc.

**Ken:** What attributes do students need to be a great chess player?

**Susan:** First of all, great chess students must have passion and love for the game. But to consistently improve, they have to be coachable.

**Ken:** What do you specifically mean by that?

**Susan:** A coachable student is flexible and not adverse to changing habits. When a coach tells them to make adjustments, they should be open to change.

In addition, a great chess player has to learn to adjust quickly to changes as each game unfolds. That's one of the great life skills that chess really teaches us all.

I like to say the only constant in life is change. Every single move on the chess board can change the dynamic of the game. You need to realize how those changes affect the overall picture on the board and constantly adjust to those changes. Chess trains young people to



*Susan Polgar. Photo credit: Paul Truong.*



make good choices in the game of life.

The better players win—not because what they do is always right, but because they are able to adjust to the unique dynamics of the game, through the opening, middle and end game.

**Ken:** Can you give me a specific example of this?

**Susan:** Let's say you know very little about your opponent and they only start to show their cards in the opening. If you anticipated something else, you are going to be surprised.

In that case, you need to handle your emotions.

It also applies when you have to comfortably move back and forth from an offensive to a defensive position, or vice versa.

A good chess player has to learn to move from being in the driver's seat to, in a flash, being the underdog and defend patiently.

**Ken:** Any other attributes help contribute to being a great chess player?

**Susan:** Yes, I often talk about balance in life and in chess. A great chess player is decisive but in a balanced way.

They don't over think, but they are not impulsive. They don't play too fast or too slow. They are not too confident or afraid. Of course there are many more.

**Ken:** What's the current state of women in the chess community?

**Susan:** I grew up in an era when there were very few women playing chess and I had to overcome a lot of challenges just to play in open tournaments with men. I overcame many obstacles, including sexual harassment and abuse.

In 2002, I was approached by the executive director of the USCF, Frank Niro. He approached me because he noted that less than 1% of the nearly 100,000 members of USCF were female.

Frank was looking for ways to improve those numbers and we brainstormed a number of programs. Eventually, he helped me create the Susan Polgar Foundation. <https://susanpolgarfoundation.org/>

Originally, it was focused on promoting chess to girls, but over the years, it expanded to include boys as well. I am very proud that over the years my Foundation (through partners, donors, and supporters, etc.) has awarded over seven million dollars in scholarship and other prizes to young players.

By 2014, the numbers for female participation in chess have improved considerably.

The USCF now reports that female participation has increased to about 15%.

We still have a long way to go, but I'm very proud of that accomplishment.

**Ken:** How did the Susan Polgar Chess tournament come to Seattle?



*Susan Polgar. Photo credit: Paul Truong.*

**Susan:** About 20 years ago, the Susan Polgar tournament started in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Then it moved around the country over the years and we held the event in various different states.

Then Frank Niro introduced me to the nice folks at the Washington Chess Federation, including Joshua Sinanan. The Northwest had never hosted a National Youth championship prior to this. We felt that this needed to change and we did.

We've been very happy with the partnership.

**Ken:** I understand that you are working on a new book.

**Susan:** I have authored more than a dozen chess books over the years, but this book is completely different than anything I've done before.

This book is my life story and there are virtually no chess games or notations at all in the book.

The target audience for this book is not only young chess players and their parents but people who are interested in

an inspirational story about a young girl who overcame countless challenges in a male dominated field.

So, it's really not about chess. It's meant for the mainstream audience and will be published in 2025.

I'm very proud of this book and some people have encouraged me to eventually turn this into a feature film. But one thing a time.

**Ken:** Any final thoughts you'd like to share?

**Susan:** I have a very holistic approach to chess. I believe that when you're happy you become a better student and competitor. You can thrive in both academics AND in chess at the same time. The choice doesn't have to be binary.

It certainly has been the case with GM Liem Le. He was an outstanding student and he continued to grow as a chess player. He is now ranked 16th in the world while coaching the Webster University Chess Team full time.

It certainly was the case with Wesley So. When he came to Webster, he was ranked 99th in the world. Two and half years later, he was ranked in the top 10

and consistently stayed in the top 10 since.

We managed to open the doors to a lot of young talented chess players who are getting a more rounded lifestyle by living at the university and learning about different things.

This applies to academics but also to social skills as well. Most of our students are living independently away from their parents for the first time. We welcome everyone to check out Webster and see that you can work hard, play hard, and be successful in whatever endeavor you want to pursue.

**Ken:** For those students who are trying to improve their competitive chess game, what specific advice do you have for them on how to train, study, and work to get better between tournaments?

**Susan:** Analyze your games in depth and learn from your mistakes. Solve puzzles according to your level and calculation skill. Being sharp is essential to chess success at all levels. Naturally, opening preparation or endgame training, etc. are also important, especially at the more advanced levels.

## Monroe Winter Rapid Championship



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2024

MONROE COMMUNITY SENIOR CENTER

276 SKY RIVER PKWY, MONROE, WA 98272

CO-HOSTED BY WASHINGTON CHESS FEDERATION AND MONROE CHESS CLUB

**Info/Entries:** Rekha Sagar, WCF VP,  
425-496-9160,

[Rekha4Chess@gmail.com](mailto:Rekha4Chess@gmail.com)

**Registration:** Online at  
[nwchess.com/OnlineRegistration](http://nwchess.com/OnlineRegistration).

Pay by

Debit/Credit/PayPal/SettleKing.

Registration and payment **deadline**

**Fri. Dec. 6** @ 5pm or register at-site.

**Eligibility:** Open to all juniors + adults.

**Schedule:** At-site registration:

Sat. 8:00-8:45am. Rds. @ 9am,  
10:30am, Lunch, 12:30pm, 1:45pm,  
3pm. Awards ~ 4:30pm

**WA State Elementary Qualifier!**

**Format:** A 5-round G/25; +5 Swiss  
tournament in three sections. Sections  
with <6 players may be merged.

- **Chouchan Airapetian Championship**
- **Selina Cheng U1300**
- **Lois Ruff U700**

**Prizes:** \$1,500 for 60 paid entries.

**Airapetian:** \$200-150-100-75.

**Cheng:** \$150-100-80-60.

**Ruff:** \$150-100-80-60.

**Special Prizes (per section):**

Biggest Upset Win: \$5/rd., Best

Dressed: \$10, Best Female Player: \$10,

Best Senior Player: \$10,

Kindness/Spreading Joy: \$10.

**Entry Fee:** \$50 by 11/30, \$60 after. Seniors 65+  
receive a \$25 discount. Monroe Chess Club  
Players receive 50% discount. Free entry for GMs,  
IMs, WGMs, WIMs, or US Chess 2000+. Players  
rated 1200+ & 600+ in both USCF & NWSRS may  
play up 1 section into the Airapetian & Cheng  
sections, respectively. Max of 90 players total and  
30 players per section, please register early.

**Rating:** Dual US Chess and NWSRS rated. Highest  
of Dec. US Chess or current NWSRS rating will be  
used to determine section, pairings, and prizes.

**Memberships:** Current US Chess and WCF  
membership required, other states accepted.  
Membership must be paid at time of registration.

**Byes:** Two half-point byes available. If interested,  
request before end of round 2.