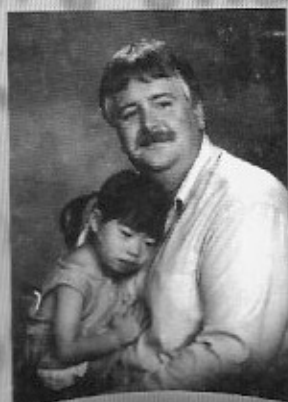


# WE

Woori • 우리

January 1997 Issue No. 5 \$4.50

Special Report:  
Cracking Hollywood



AMERICAN By

# ADOPTION



THE LIVES OF KOREAN AMERICAN ADOPTees



# WE

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## C O N T E N T S

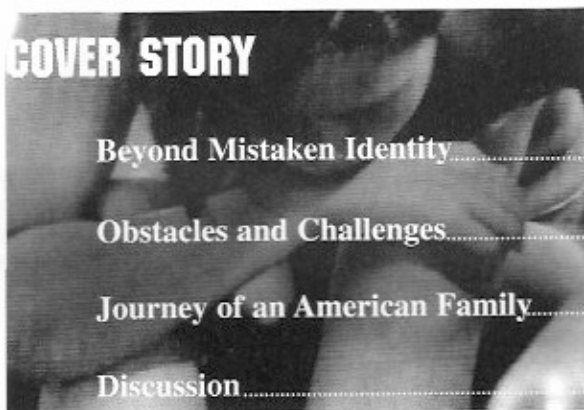
From the Editor.....5  
 From Our Readers.....6



### NEWS

Korean American Today.....8  
 Korea Today.....12  
 North Korea Today.....16

From 1950, hundreds of thousands of children born in South Korea have been adopted into predominantly Caucasian families worldwide. Among all the intercountry adoptees in the U.S., Koreans make up 60%. Recognizing the significance of Korean American adoptees, WE Magazine dedicates this issue's cover story to their life stories. In doing so, we hope to provide a forum in which many aspects of this community can be explored.



### COVER STORY

Beyond Mistaken Identity.....19  
 Obstacles and Challenges.....23  
 Journey of an American Family.....24  
 Discussion.....28  
 A Father's Fears.....32  
 Poems and Letters.....34  
 Profiles.....36  
     Adoptees.....37  
     Organizations.....39



## AMERICAN BY ADOPTION

**F**rom 1950, hundreds of thousands of children born in South Korea have been adopted into predominantly Caucasian families worldwide. Among all the intercountry adoptees in the U.S., Koreans make up 60%. Recognizing the significance of Korean American adoptees, *WE Magazine* dedicates this issue's cover story to their life stories. In doing so, we hope to provide a forum in which many aspects of this community can be explored.

The main article examines the comprehensive history and current status of the adoptee population. Through the words of the adoptive parents, readers will share the joys and anxieties in raising children of different racial background. We also attempt to capture the ethos of the Korean American adoptees through their prose, poetry, and artwork. The individual profiles trace the different paths taken by several prominent adoptees.

We also introduce some of the organizations that are at the forefront of the Korean American adoptee community. Readers may find some of the answers in the discussion section surprising because

they reveal the wide spectrum of viewpoints in our relations with each other and the Korean American community.

Through all this, we hope to shed new light on how we redefine this community that we call Korean American. However, ultimately the responsibility of redefining lies with all the members of our community. *WE Magazine* challenges our readers. 



Video still from "Living in Half-Tones" © 1994 Mr. K. Moon



# BEYOND MISTAKEN IDENTITY

## REDEFINING THE KOREAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

By Prumeh Lee and  
Hollee McGinnis

In early 1996, Korea and the United States became immersed in the story of a U.S. Air Force Academy cadet named Brian Bauman, who was desperately seeking a matching bone marrow donor so that he could live. Thousands of Koreans and Americans lined up to volunteer to be tested. His search led him to a reunion with his family members in Korea. Who is this young man and what is his relation to Korea? Brian Bauman is a Korean American adoptee who was adopted at age 5 by an American couple in Minnesota. Bauman's search for his birthparents to find a matching bone marrow donor became a wake-up call for many people in the United States and Korea to the presence of hundreds of thousands of Korean American adoptees. Brian Bauman's search reflects a larger community of people whose lives have been shaped by decades of international adoptions.

Today there are approximately 130,000 Korean-born adoptees in the United States. The stories of adoption spark the imagination and touch the heart, from the joy and challenges experienced by adoptive parents, to the questions of identity and belonging by adoptees and reunions with birthparents. The power of international adoptions lies in the way adoption itself challenges societal norms of family and community as well as assumptions about race and culture.

### DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL ADOPTIONS

Adoption agencies were developed in the United States and other Western societies in response to the disruption of the extended family caused by the industrialization and urbanization of the 1800's. Traditionally the adoption of a child

occurred within the extended family. Adoption laws were formulated to create legal avenues by which children could be legitimized as a member of a family to whom no ties of blood existed. Adoption was seen as a way for a childless couple, who were from an emerging white middle class, to build a family. The importance of blood kinship, however, was perpetuated by adoption agencies who endeavored to "match" children with their prospective parents, assessing not only similarities in physical characteristics, but also the intellectual capacity of the child. The adoption of children who were racially different was prohibited by many adoption laws, reflecting the anti-miscegenation sentiment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

By the 1960's and 1970's, shifts in American attitudes about adoption and race supported the continuation of international adoptions. The wider use and availability of birth control devices, the legalization of abortion, and the fact that more white unwed mothers were keeping their babies, contributed to a shortage of white babies available for adoption.

Thus, couples seeking to adopt often would discover that white babies were scarce but there were thousands of babies of other races who needed homes. Adoption agencies became less concerned with the need to physically "match" children with adoptive parents and many adoption laws prohibiting biracial adoptions were ruled unconstitutional. With more handicapped and minority children in need of homes, trans-racial and inter-

country adoptions became a viable means of removing children from institutions and into permanent families. The prevalence of international adoption also reflects the relative ease by which parents could adopt children from other countries as opposed to children who were American-born, since the wait to adopt a child born overseas was shorter.

The largest proportion of international adoption for the past four decades has been from Korea. (See the table on page 21.) According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, the highest annual total ever recorded for international adoptions occurred in 1987 with the adoption of 10,097 children born overseas. Of the total, 75 percent of the children were from Asia with 59 percent coming from Korea alone. One of the reasons for the large number of Korean-born adoptees in the United States is that Korea was one of the first countries to participate in international adoption. The first inter-country adoptions occurred as a

Adoption challenges  
societal norms of  
family and community.

result of  
the  
humanitarian  
appeal to  
rescue  
children  
from  
war-torn

European countries after World War II. Similarly, the adoption of Korean-born children began in the 1950's as a result of the moral appeal made on behalf of the orphaned children and the mixed-race children left by U.S. soldiers during the Korean War.

The Korean war devastated Korea and its people. Korea's community and government support systems were utterly destroyed. There were literally thousands



of children whose families had either died or lost them in the midst of the violence and chaos of the Korean War. As America saw the news footage and photographs of the hungry and sick orphaned children wandering the streets of Korea, some Americans began to organize to adopt the orphaned children. Shortly after the war, the writer, Pearl S. Buck, arranged for a number of mixed-race Korean children to be brought to the United States for adoption through Welcome House, an agency she had founded. Harry Holt, a lumberman from Oregon was so moved by the plight of these children that in 1955 he flew to Korea and brought home eight children. He and his wife Bertha, could not forget the children they had left behind and began Holt International Services in 1956, founded on the belief that "Every child deserves a home of his own." The vision of the Holt family spurred on a national media blitz, sparking thousands of families to adopt Korean orphans. Today, Holt is one of the leading adoption agencies in international adoptions, placing over 24,000 children from Korea in the United States.

### KOREAN TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION

Adoption in Korea was not uncommon. With large extended families providing economic and social support, families often adopted orphans within the family. Or if the eldest son of the family did not bear any son, he would adopt his sibling's son to preserve the family lineage. But Koreans rarely adopted children who were socially stigmatized as "illegitimate," because they were born out of wedlock or from extra-marital affairs. And the act of adopting a non-blood related child was, and still is, foreign to many Koreans, as the child is not considered part of the family lineage. Thus, the population of

orphans continued to rise through the decades.

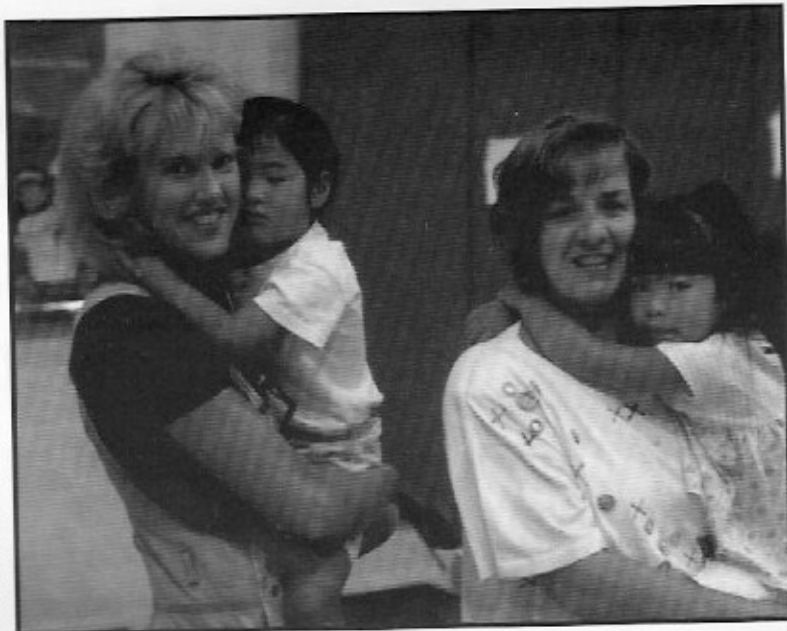
Today, Korea is ranked as America's fifth largest trading partner and has the 11th largest economy in the world. However, its per capita GNP at \$10,000 is only half that of the United States. As Korea becomes an industrialized nation, Koreans are now facing societal and welfare problems that Western countries have had to confront in the past. Economically, Korea may have transformed drastically, but the cultural or social transformation was not as significant. Furthermore, the economic development of Korea does not parallel an improvement in the social and political status of women. Women in the 60's and 70's only earned 40% of a man's wages and the lack of government social welfare structures for women further pressured a mother to give up her child.

International adoption continued in Korea through the decades after the

would have a chance at a better life.

After the Seoul Olympics of '88, when Bryant Gumbel of NBC's Today Show referred to Korea's largest export commodity as its children, the Korean government felt humiliated and ashamed before the world. To this day, many Koreans are ashamed of how international adoptions imply that Koreans are unable to take care of their children. Korea received a wake-up call from the Bauman family when it realized that it continues to share a responsibility for its children, even though they may be scattered across the world. The Korean government has begun changing laws in an attempt to make adoption more attractive and secure to encourage Korean couples to adopt children from orphanages. This has included allowing Korean parents to register their adopted children in official family registries and giving adoptive families preference for government housing.

In 1993, the number of children brought to the United States from Korea for adoption dropped from 5,910 in 1987 to 1,765, reflecting a limit imposed by the Korean government. The government had decided to ban all foreign adoption by 1996, except for the adoption of children who were handicapped or mixed-race, but retracted its decision in 1994. Korea has begun to change their attitude of ignorance and alienation of the Korean American adoptees to that of a more open and supportive mother country. As many



Korean War because of the strong American demand of adoptable children, combined with the Korea's perception of America as a land of opportunity—a sentiment which also contributed to the influx of Korean immigrants to the United States during the 1960's and 1970's. For mothers, the fear of giving up a child for adoption in America was tempered by the belief that their children

Korean American adoptees and their families are returning to Korea to find their birthparents and discover their heritage, Koreans must reconsider what it means to be a Korean and who it is that can gain access to its community.

### BUILDING IDENTITIES

"Are you related to them?" "Are you his baby-sitter?" "Are they really your chil-

dren?" Seemingly innocent questions by strangers who pass by.

But to the adoptees and their families, it is a day to day struggle to have to establish themselves as a family which challenges a societal norm of limiting race and ethnicity to distinct categories and finds a point of conflict in the interracial adoptive families.

The issue over racial identity formation has always been a major concern in international adoption and reflects the broader controversy about race in America. Ever since the 1970's, the National Association of Black Social Workers and Native American groups have advocated against interracial adoptions, arguing that it is a form of genocide causing lifelong psychological damage because the adopted children are left confused about their racial identity. The argument follows that white parents are not able to give their non-white children the skills and insights necessary in a race-conscious society. The degree to which race should be a priority in the placement of children continues to be debated by agencies who confront the problem of balancing racial considerations with the urgency of placing a child in a permanent home.

Today, some adopting families are actively trying to teach their children how to cope with racism by exposing them to Korean culture and participating in groups with other families with adopted Koreans. Some parents feel because they have adopted a Korean child, they too have become Asian American families and have become very interested in learning about Korean

culture, customs and food so as to foster cultural pride in their children. Some agencies are now running programs to assist parents in developing the cultural identity of their adopted child. In addition, week-long summer culture camps have been developed by parents to teach Korean culture and language to Korean American adoptees. Many camps encourage the entire family to

attend so that it will be the whole families, not just the adoptees, who gain a Korean heritage. At Camp Pride in Illinois, many of the families plan their whole summer around the camp. Several dozen parents take time off from work to volunteer as teachers, cooks, gym teachers, and coordinators. In addition, at Camp Sejong in New Jersey, many of the counselors are older adopted Koreans or Korean Americans who become role models to the younger children. For many Korean American adoptees, these camps are their first exposure to a larger community of people with similar experiences and provide an opportunity for children as well as parents to talk about adoption and encounters with racism.

Deborah Johnson, a prominent social worker who is also Korean and adopted, believes that in raising Korean American adoptees, much insight, focus, and self-

education is needed. Some parents are reluctant to force their children to learn about Korean culture because they feel that their children will be growing up in the United States and will be essentially American. For the second generation Korean American raised in Korean families, a search for their Korean heritage and identity usually results in a closer binding of the family. However,

when Korean American adoptees seek their Korean roots, it is often a difficult time for adoptive parents, as many fear the loss of their child. However, Don Sibley, an adoptive parent and director of Camp Pride feels that parents "should be willing to take risks. The potential benefits of giving as much information of who they are, where they come from, outweigh the risks because later when they need to make decisions it is important to have the choices available." Culture camps and the formation of support groups for adoptive families is a progressive steps towards nurturing adoptees and their families who are faced with issues that intersect issues of adoption, ethnicity, and culture.

While raising Korean American children, adoptive families, usually for the first time, must deal with the pains of racism through the experiences of the

## When Korean American adoptees seek their Korean roots, many adoptive parents fear the loss of their child.

### INTERNATIONAL ADOPTIONS 1983-1994

Number of Visas per Year

Region of Birth	1994	1993	1992	1991	1990	1989	1988	1987	1986	1985	1984	1983
All Countries	8,195	7,348	6,536	9,008	7,088	7,948	9,120	10,097	9,945	9,286	8,327	7,127
Asia	n/a	3,163	3,032	3,194	3,823	5,112	6,484	7,614	7,679	6,991	6,251	5,334
Korea	1,795	1,765	1,787	1,817	2,603	3,552	4,942	5,910	6,188	5,694	5,157	4,412
Europe	n/a	1,522	874	2,761	232	120	99	122	103	91	79	96
Africa	n/a	59	63	41	49	36	28	22	22	11	8	12
Latin America	n/a	2,596	1,154	2,984	2,938	2,661	2,481	2,319	2,106	2,173	1,971	1,668

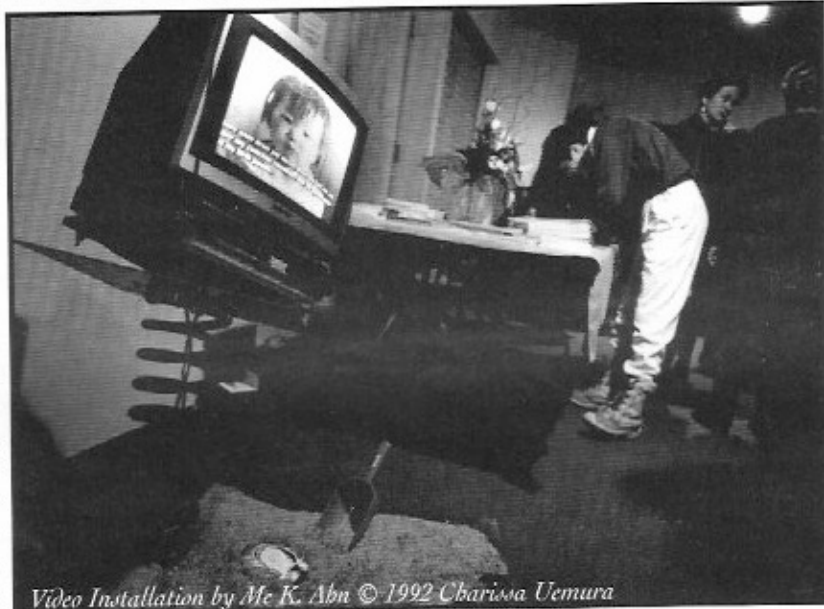
Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service

child. Korean American adoptees when dealing with their identity, do not have access to the same support of family or friends who have gone through similar experiences; often times, they may be the only person of color in the school or community. Parents are trying to teach their children how to cope with racism and their ethnic identity struggle, but these are things that parents themselves have not all developed. Deborah Johnson comments, "Parents are trying to learn traditional culture, but the really hard work is dealing with the issues of being different and what that means is very difficult."

Although the current multicultural sentiment and the presence of the Korean immigrant community has helped to foster a greater awareness of Korean culture, true empathy comes from understanding the experiences of being a racial ethnic minority in the United States. Parents are realizing that what happens in the Asian American community now impacts their life because of their adopted children. It is in this recognition that Don Sibley feels, "It is essential that we have as much contact and communication as we can between the Korean American community and the adoptee community. Both groups have a lot to share with each other, and a lot to learn from each other." Unfortunately, many Korean American adoptees and their families feel alienated from the Korean American community despite their interests. They are continuously confronted by misunderstanding and stereotyping by both the first and the second generation Korean Americans. However, many in the Korean American community, including the adoptees, recognize that they, as Asian Americans, do share similar experiences as ethnic minorities in America.

## THE DIVERSITY OF THE KOREAN AMERICAN ADOPTEE COMMUNITY

Korean American adoptees in the United States are a diverse body of people. Some are fully Asian, some half Asian and half African, and others half Asian and Caucasian. Although most of the adoptees are adopted when they are infants or toddlers, others are adopted



Video Installation by Me K. Ahn © 1992 Charrissa Uemura

when they are six and older. Some grew up in Jewish families; others were raised in Christian homes. They have parents who are ethnically Irish, Italian, Polish, Swedish, French, German, African, or Japanese. In this diverse community, Korean American adoptees are tied by their bridges to Korea, adoption, and the United States.

As adult Korean American adoptees look to raising their children, many come to a critical point in deciding what it is they must pass on to their children in relation to their identity. The need for discovery and affirmation may help to explain the recent surge of support groups in the Korean American adoptee community. Many of these groups offer mentorship and support programs for adoptees and their parents. Some organizations attempt to educate adoptees in the tradition and heritage of the Korean culture and still other organizations assist

adoptees in the search for their birthparents. These support groups are reflective of the efforts of the adoptees to form groups where their experiences are shared and understood.

The Korean American adoptees could serve as a role model to the Korean American community. After all, the search for self-identity is an experience that all communities share and although the Korean American adoptees have a difficult and complex search in front of them, it is not a task they shy away from nor just blindly accept. The attitudes towards self-identity should be admired and adopted by the Korean American community as well.

Currently, the concept of the Korean American community is being challenged and transformed into a more inclusive identity through the acceptance and affirmation of

Korean American adoptees and their families. As Chris Winston, a parent and founder of "Friends for Korea," states: "I would like to see whole families being accepted into the Korean American community because it is not enough to only accept the children." It is a challenge for the Korean American community to nurture, support, and give a place of belonging for adoptees and their families. One-point-five and second generation Korean Americans are challenged to define and understand the meaning of being Korean American and redefine the Korean American community to recognize and empower all who want to be part of it. **WE**

*Prumeb Lee, a second generation Korean American, is a staff writer for WE Magazine. Hollee McGinnis is a Korean American adoptee who founded a.k.a. inc. in New York.*





# OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

**PERSONAL ACCOUNT: ONE ADOPTEE'S STRUGGLE TO EMBRACE TWO WORLDS**

By Su Niles

I am struggling. Alternately strong and excited, then sad and angry, I am working my way through some sort of life maze. If this reads as though I am going in a multitude of directions, then it is an accurate reflection of what's happening inside of me.

My journey is two-fold: To lay to rest the past and create for myself a future. Sometimes I want to just give up, but then, I see the prize before me, and continue on.

This has been my most difficult challenge: To overcome the effects of a turbulent childhood. My adoptive parents were alcoholics, my mother emotionally and physically abusive to me, and because I was Korean in an all-white family, I fought the feelings of isolation and loneliness. Other adoptees have similar stories to share: the degenerative effects of alcoholism, the humiliation of sexual abuse, the eating away of your self-esteem when your adoption gets continually thrown in your face.

There are many of us out there, working through these very real obstacles. We are, collectively, functional, bright and articulate. We utilize these things to hide our feelings of shame, inadequacy and deep, deep hurt. I used to downplay my experiences. No longer. If indeed the truth shall set us free, then I must adhere to that belief in my personal life. What I experienced was real, painful and perhaps, even beyond complete repair. I continue to find a way to work through these issues so I can put them away. I do this for my future, and how I want to live.

The future frightens me, yet I am intrigued. Carrying the scars only makes my challenge greater. And that challenge is to find my place within the Korean com-

munity. Having no contact with anything Korean as a child and young adult, I am determined to make up for the lost years. It is an exciting, fulfilling, yet sad journey, too. Culturally, I am an American. Raised on steak, potatoes, McDonald's and fried chicken, this hardly prepared me for bulgogi, mandu, kimchee or chopchae.

This is just the basic level. There is an emotional tie that is indescribable. I am compelled to assimilate all that I can about Korea and what being Korean means. At the same time, I recognize all too deeply some inescapable facts. Regardless of how many

Korean cultural events I attend, regardless of how much of the Korean language I learn, and regardless of how many Korean friends I make, I will never, ever regain in full measure the culture which I have lost. This is my greatest sorrow. Once my birthmother relinquished me and I was flown to America, all those ties to Korea were cut. I will never be wholly Korean.

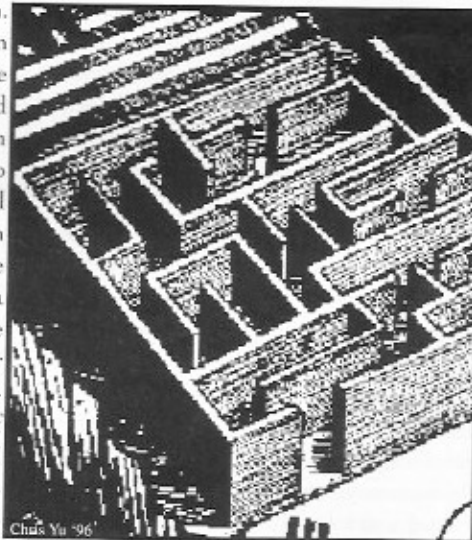
I walk in this skin. And in this skin, I am any American. A single image has been etched inside of me. American pie, From Sea to Shining Sea... all semantics. But my skin conflicts with me. The world sees me as a Color. Crossing the culture gap with other pioneers who are braving the elements of their own prejudices, I realize how much energy it takes to open the mind, however willing the spirit. And I slam up against the impenetrable wall.

It hurts so much to still be on the outside. It is altogether a lovely pain, one with which I am intimate. This skin has cost me dearly. My elementary school phrases are a flag that denotes my infancy in this world I am visiting. *Abnyong basayo, kamsa bannida...* conversational Korean. But my skin conflicts with me once again. Listening to the melody of this language spoken by its natives in the comfort of their conference, I realize how far I have to go, despite how far I've come. And I press myself against the impenetrable wall.

I walk in this skin. And in this skin, I have found another world. Not in America, not in Korea... but where? I cannot wholly accept one and wholly reject the other. It is painful, to embrace two worlds, to tie the laces of the insides of me. Closely resembling a war within where there is neither victor nor vanquished, I understand - perhaps too late - this may well be my destiny. To sit forever by the impenetrable wall.

So, I must take what I can. Through the years of understanding the impact of

intercountry adoption on myself and other adoptees, I have finally come to accept these things: I am Korean. I will always be Korean. I can no more alter that than I can alter my gender. And I am going forward to the goal I've set before me: To attain to the best of my ability the culture that, by birth, truly belongs to me. ■



*Su Niles is the chairperson of the Sacramento Adult Adoptee Group.*





Members of Friends of Korea



By Chris Winston

## JOURNEY OF AN AMERICAN FAMILY

### BEGINNINGS

I stay at home with my seven year old son in defiance of every college friend who is now working with a masters degree or better. My BA. in psychology, makes me think of how Piaget won the right to stay at home with his children by studying them. I study my son, but only in my heart. I want more children, but my body hasn't cooperated. We decide to adopt.

We call the county. An "older child" means twelve and up, unless we do foster care. We wonder what all that "coming and going" might mean for our son and for us. We are discouraged.

When we call another agency, we are told that there are girls who are four to six years old available. As we wonder why, they say that the children come from Korea.

My husband's best friend is of Chinese heritage with a brother and sister adopted long ago from Korea. I think of all the photos my husband has of his friends sister, a favorite model for pictures from their high school dark room. I can imagine a daughter who looks like this.

### WAITING

The homestudy and approval from the agency go quickly. Yet, as we wait for the referral, I think of little else and cry a lot. How much this feels like the infertility. So bound by limits.

Her picture comes. She is one year old, not five, a beautiful smiling baby. She is Asian. For a second I am surprised. Why?

As we wait, I read everything I can find about Korea. One is a book by Richard Kim, *Lost Names*. I worry about changing her name. We have already

chosen a name - Diana - Roman Goddess, dressed in silver, drives the moon across the sky, protectress of women and young children. Her Korean name means "pure silver". I am delighted with the "fit". She will be our daughter. Keeping her Korean name, we will wrap our name around it, knowing in gladness and in sadness that we are changing who she is.

Something is wrong at INS and miraculously I talk my way into the office of someone with actual authority. The paperwork is lost. They are looking among stacks on the floor for February's mail.

Unless they carry me out, I am not leaving. They call the agency and will have it re-sent. NO! I will bring it myself. The man is amazed that I want to drive 10 blocks. Doesn't he realize that I am willing to travel half way around the world? I bring him the paperwork and ignore his parting shot, "Now you will have one of your own." It is not what he means, but I feel in fighting for her that she is my own and now she will come home.

### FALLING IN LOVE WITH KOREA

We go to Korea and we fall in love. Our son is delighted; everyone wants to have their picture taken with him. We don't know why this is. Totally caught off guard, I am overwhelmed by the warmth of people toward us. Can a whole country consider you a guest?

Before we meet our daughter the Korean social worker warns us, "She is shy with strangers, she will cry." But, she doesn't. In my arrogance, I think that it is I who have won her over, until later when I see the pictures.

I have been given a gift. In the pictures I see frame by frame how a young Korean woman, who cares for too many babies, has transitioned her to me. She has my daughter on the floor with her hands on her shoulders. As I stroke her hair and gradually her cheek, the woman's hands slide slowly down my daughters body, until she moves clear across the room, taking the camera from

my husband, taking pictures of all of us. My daughters eyes are like India ink, so dark that one cannot even see the centers. They gaze at me. *Sarangbae* sweet baby.

### WANTING MORE CHILDREN

My son and daughter relate well. Someone in Burger King coos at our daughter and offers her a balloon. Our son puts his face next to hers. "She'd like two." He is a fountain of knowledge on Korea. Our daughter who at age one was not crawling, blooms in our close attention.

We begin the process again wanting to improve the ethnicity balance in our family, wanting more children. The social worker comes to our home for a visit, arriving before my husband. When my husband arrives our daughter jumps up and runs into his arms, "Daddy!" It isn't hard to be re-approved.

But, things have changed. The Olympics came to Korea. Adoptions have slowed. We wait and wait as the prospect of another Korean child dims. We ask the social worker to rewrite our homestudy for Viet Nam. As I leave her office, I say, "If we get a referral from Korea today, we will take it." By 7:00 that night, is it a miracle, we have a picture of a five year old Korean boy.

### RETURN TO KOREA

We agonize over who will go to Korea to get him. International travel with a 2 1/2 year old is difficult, but we all go, with our daughter screaming practically the whole trip. I stand on a street corner in Itaewon and rock her, a baby with her days and nights mixed up. A Canadian man comes up to me, an adoptive father himself. He says, "sometimes it is best just to go straight to the airport." I cringe. This is not my new child. In the back of my mind I wonder, do the sounds and smells make her think we are giving her back.

In a better moment, she flirts with strangers on the train to *Inchon*. One man with enough English asks, "Korean

girl?" When we say "yes," he comments, "Very Western." It is not a compliment.

We meet our five-year-old son, who comes with us willingly. When we give him a new backpack full of toys for the plane ride, he sits in the middle of the airport floor and won't get up, opening it. But when my husband and older son start to walk away, he picks it up and follows, chattering in Korean.

On the plane, we sit next to a Korean man who has just visited his wife and young children. He is an immigrant returning to a shoe business in L.A., to spend Christmas alone. Missing his family, he becomes an extended part of ours. Our younger son sits between this man and my husband. The man translates our sons wishes and offers reassurances. When at landing our son starts to cry, I am helpless. Our helpful friend reaches over and unbuckles our sons seatbelt. In my newness as a mother, I do not rebuckle it. As we walk down the ramp off the plane, the Korean man hands us a business card and says we may call him. He gently puts his hands on our sons shoulders and kisses him on the forehead. It is like a blessing.

At Christmas time, I send this man a card with pictures of our son, but somehow lose the address afterward. When the L. A. riots happen I search for the address desperately, but cannot find it. I cannot even remember his name, though I clearly remember his face. I wonder if he was ever able to bring his family over or if he is all right.

### ADJUSTMENTS

My younger son can't tell us what he wants for Christmas, but we have figured it out. He tapes toy cars to the bottoms of his shoes-roller-skates. He finds an old car antenna and points it at another toy car. It is the first in a series of remote control cars that he will save his allowance and do odd jobs for. He watches *Pinnocchio* and points at the long nose. "Mommy!" Does he think we are all liars? It is only the first in a string of "Disney moments."

I have a new Korean friend. I had

walked into her dry cleaners and asked for help translating for my new son. In my ignorance, I believe that if she speaks to him once a week in Korean that he will be bilingual. At the end of six months, we visit my friends mother, our *balmonce*, who speaks to our young son in Korean. My son turns to me, "Mommy what she talk?" I am thunderstruck that he does not know. He is a child without any competent language. I now know that it has a name, subtractive bilingualism. His native intelligence is clearly well above average, but he has lost Korean and flounders in English, when we attempt deeper conversation. It is like a learning disability that affects him for years. In our frustration, we fight often.

My older son gets quieter and quieter. We get counseling. My younger son is watching *Cinderella* and comments on the stepmother, "I used to have a mom like that. Now I just have my favorite mom." Child of my heart, whenever we fight, I play that tape in my mind to gain control.

My younger son begins to avoid Asians. He says that he is afraid that "mommy will be all gone." Remembering the orphanage, he says that Koreans are mean. I am concerned about his self-esteem. My Korean friend visits Korea and my sons orphanage. When she returns, she relays conversations that convince us both that my son is doing better emotionally than he was while in Korea. It is small comfort observing what still seem to be overwhelming struggles for him.

### KOREAN SCHOOL

My dry cleaner friend convinces me to send my daughter to Korean school with her daughter. The first day, the stares are somewhat overwhelming, but we persevere. My daughter, now 5, seems comfortable with her friend who serves as her guide. Reluctantly I leave, pausing at the entrance to the school where I buy a children's Korean workbook for myself. I do not believe that

she can learn Korean by herself.

When I come back, the principal greets me, asking if I would like to learn Korean. I jump at the chance. There are three adults at the school among over one hundred children. The other two adults have Korean spouses or have lived in Korea. There are also second generation students in our class.

They are reading paragraphs. I struggle with the alphabet, working as hard as I can, with the irrational fear that if I do not do well enough, they will ask me to leave. It is a fear that continues over the years in different forms as I struggle with my sense of entitlement, my right to pursue this connection for myself as well as for my children.

But, it is my friend who leaves the school. Funny things are happening. Often the heat is off and we wear gloves and coats. Some kind of power struggle is going on that I don't understand - one faction against the other. We move to a much smaller place next to a Korean market. I am confused.

My dry cleaner friend says church is better and decides to take her daughter to the Korean school at her church. We visit her church and are welcomed. But, it is too fundamentalist for me. There are more politics there as well. I decide to stay with the secular Korean school. We belong to an adoption support group, I do their newsletter. But, I am trying to make the Korean connections separate from adoption. We are trying to be a Korean American family. It seems possible.

Without her friend, my daughter

flounders. Kids ask questions. "How come you are English and she isn't?" One day two girls tease her because her mother is Caucasian and she doesn't understand Korean. She cries a long time. I don't take her back, but I keep going myself. I feel challenged to find a connection for my kids.

That summer, I convince five adoptive



*Learning to Bow on the Lunar New Year*

families that they want to learn Korean. I convince a teacher from Korean school and the principal to help us. We have a summer program for just the five families. It is exhilarating and all family members participate. By fall both of my sons, my husband, my daughter, and I are learning Korean. We ask to be admitted to the school as a separate program on Sunday afternoons.

I now no longer speak only for myself and my family, but act as liaison for adoptive families in Sacramento. The school needs a building. A fundraising campaign ensues. Having come into the community expecting to give as well as receive, I feel that without reciprocity one has tolerance and not acceptance. My children are not charity cases. I do not just want to take, I want to give something back. What will it be?

## SINGING CAUCASIANS

I am invited to a meeting planning a fund-raiser for the school. As the only non-Korean in this entirely Korean environment, I am not as nervous as I should be because it is fascinating. These people have professional mainstream jobs, but here they are Korean. I guess that this is what it means to be bicultural.

A Korean American psychologist is chairman of the fundraising committee. His wife is one of most stunningly beautiful women I have met. It seems incongruous to me that she is also soft, sweet. He asks if the adoptive parents would be willing to sing Korean songs at the fund-raiser and buy tickets at \$60 a piece. It is a request I could never have anticipated.

How can I come through on this one. They each have to make their own decision and these adoptive parents do not even sing in church. I am sure that \$60 will be too much. As I hesitate, they drop the price to \$40, especially for us. I feel shame.

Though he is challenging me, there is something about this man that makes me know this is a legitimate request, something that feels like acceptance. I will come to know him better, always valuing his intelligence and generous heart, his eccentricity. Somehow we all decide to buy the tickets and attend the fund-raiser.

In segregation, we congregate on one side of the room. Our children sing first. Mixed in with the second generation children, they seem absorbed into the community, as we stand out like



sore thumbs. My eyes mist with tears. Are we giving them back?

We sing and the audience joins in with big smiles. In our singing, they seem to find our acceptance of them, an unexpected piece of Korean culture. I have prepared something to say. Two lines to thank them for including us in the community stretches endlessly in Korean. Taking on blind faith the word of my teacher that this is an accurate translation, I listen to a tape of her voice over and over, so that I can parrot it correctly, *Hankuk arini rul cep yong ah...* At the end they all clap.

**FAMILY**

We are in every sense a family, but outsiders challenge us within considerate, sometimes racist remarks. "What a nice thing you have done." "Are they really brother and sister?" "How nice you have one of your own," "What are they?" "I guess you grow to love them?"

My daughter, at nine, celebrates her Koreanness on her own, - "I don't need your help mom," - she teaches hangul to her third grade class. At the Korean Episcopal church, she stands comfortably on the steps passing out programs with other second generation kids. She is at home. She accepts her heritage as she accepts breathing.

My sons are so different from each other - one very academic, the other a social butterfly. They fight. It is Halloween. My younger son wants to make a devils costume with glowing eyes. When my husband becomes frustrated with the complexity of it, my older son offers to help. The boys disappear into the garage and re-emerge with a devils mask glowing with red Christmas tree lights. Winning the costume contest, my younger son splits the coupons for junk food with his brother.

My older son is interested in a girl. She is from Thailand. He helps her with her

math and English, having developed an understanding of second language difficulties. He is a national merit semi-finalist and in his required essay he describes how his multi-cultural family has affected him.

My younger son is a survivor who values independence above all else. Put an obstacle in front of him and he climbs over it or smashes through it. His hugs also let me know he values family.

I have no control over my sons' relationship. They build it themselves. We have done a difficult thing adopting from another country. I do not believe it is a wrong thing, but it is a difficult thing, with life-long challenges. We do our best to meet them.<sup>100</sup>

*Chris Winston is the president of "Friends of Korea," an adoptee support group in Sacramento, CA.*

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## DISCUSSION:

# CROSS-SECTION OF THE KOREAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

*WE Magazine invited several Korean Americans with different backgrounds to share with us and each other their ideas about the Korean American community. We hope you find this discussion as fascinating as we did.* Ed.

### Participants:

**Kalee Ahlin** is a 26-year-old Korean American adoptee. At the age of five, she was adopted with her sister into a small town family in central Minnesota. Recently she worked for a year in Korea as an English teacher. She currently works in an advertising agency and plans to go on to a medical school.

**Julie Hill** was adopted when she was four by a farming family in Southern Illinois along with another eleven-months-old Korean girl. For the past eleven years, she has been working for American Airlines as a flight attendant.

**Lincoln Hill** and his twin brother were adopted by missionary parents when they were still premature infants struggling to survive. He was one of triplets born into a family of six children in Yeosoo, Korea. In 1977 he and his adoptive family moved back to the United States, but never lost contact with his biological family. While working for Sam's Club, Lincoln met his wife Julie. Currently, he works as an automobile sales representative.

**Esther Kang** is a 23-year-old second generation Korean American law student. She said she didn't become more in "tune" with the Korean heritage until she went to college.

**John Lee** is a thirty-something 1.5 generation lawyer who came to the U.S. when he was 11. He considers himself part of the community from a social and cultural standpoint but not political standpoint. While growing up, he had very little con-

tact with the Korean community to the point where he said he completely forgot Korean but relearned the language while attending law school.

**HanJoo Lee, Prumeh Lee, and Kevin J. Park** are staff writers with WE Magazine.

**Q:** What do you think makes the Korean American community?

**Lincoln:** I don't know much about the Korean American community since I didn't grow up in a Korean or Asian community. From what I know of the Korean American community in Chicago, just like other ethnic communities, I know that it's very tight. Tradition runs strong in the Korean American community. Language also plays a big part of the community. Without [speaking Korean], it's hard for me to relate.

**John:** I don't think it's language per

se. Esther and I could have a huge amount of affinity and we may never even talk in Korean, but it's really the commonality of the experience of growing up in an immigrant family. We share almost none of that with adoptees. I think there are some affinities because we look alike. But I don't know if they feel that they need to be part of the Korean American community. I think it's more of a curiosity than anything else. I don't know if it goes any deeper than that.

**Esther:** What about those who were born here? What about my children?

**John:** But you share your parents' experience as opposed to families that have been here for generations. In the future, I expect the Korean American community to be more blurred from an ethnic standpoint. They'll feel much more at home here because it'll be their home.

**Kalee:** It depends on the individual. Some of my Korean American adoptee friends gravitate toward other Korean Americans. Others don't. On certain levels, I do relate to Korean Americans from immigrant families. I don't have the same sense of family as they do. I don't have a particular need to hang out with other Korean Americans.

**Esther:** Do other Korean Americans

feel awkward towards you?

**Kalee:** I think it's more of a curiosity. Although when I was in Korea, I thought I was treated like a leper by many people. They were totally shocked when in fact I'm just a normal person.

**Lincoln:** It has a lot to do with language also. When I see Koreans speaking in Korean, something clicks in my brain and I wish I could speak as well.

**John:** I get a lot of resumes from Korean American lawyers. If they don't speak Korean, they're worse off. Koreans can forgive non-Koreans for not speaking Korean, but not the Koreans.

**Kalee:** The people I met in Korea were like, "So are you Thai? Japanese?" and etc.... Also, I got paid less than the white teachers. It was really an eye-opening experience for me.

**John:** There's a saying: "Koreans are worse to each other than they're to foreigners."

**Q:** How about Korean Americans?

**John:** I think a lot of it carries over. But for the future, I think that one big



Kalee Ahlin

factor will be whether the immigration will continue or stop.

**Lincoln:** I don't think it'll stop because America is still the best country to live in.

**Q:** Do you think now that the language of the new generation of Korean Americans is English, that it would be possible for different sub-groups to merge?

**Esther:** I think the problem right now is that there are all these distinctions. But later on, I don't think those distinctions will exist anymore.

**John:** It all depends on if a magazine like this succeeds or not. To me, the next 10 years will be very telling. First of all, the group of people you are talking about are very young. I'm

at the outer edge of that group.

**Q:** When did you become aware of your Korean American identity, if at all?

**Kalee:** When I first went to camp and experienced the cultural things. Also more so when I went to college and the KSA. I went to the KSA meetings but sometimes they spoke in Korean. I just felt like I didn't belong.

**Q:** [to Lincoln and Julie] Did you also go to these adoptee camps?

**Lincoln:** No. I went to "regular" camps all my childhood. I always knew where I came from and what my background was. In some ways, I did seek my Korean heritage. But because I didn't associate with Koreans while growing up, I didn't want to get involved with any Koreans. If you don't see them for hundreds and hundreds of miles around, then you just deal with the people around you.

**Q:** For the adoptees, I would think that it would be harder to deal with racism perhaps because parents might



Lincoln and Julie Hill



not be able to relate to that experience.

**Kalee:** I obviously don't know about Korean families but my family is Swedish American. There is a very stoic treatment. I mean, we never talked about [racism] when I was a kid. Things that happened to me, I would never talk about it with my parents.

**John:** I think that's also true of those who were born here. The people who have a certain personal experience and understanding about their deep history can draw strength from self-identity and can effectively deal with racism. [By the time] I came here, I had gone to school in Korea enough that there was a certain confidence that came along with it. Frankly, I was called a lot of names as a kid but I was able to shoot back. To me, it was just kids playing.

**Esther:** I always knew I was Korean, of course. I got teased in school: Chink and Jap, but never Gook. I knew this Korean guy who said he was full-blooded American and didn't identify with the Korean American community at all. I told him that he might have been born and raised as an American but he still had Korean blood in him and you can't deny that. He was like, "Why not?"

**John:** It's not denial. I mean I feel more American and I was even born over there. Yes, I am Korean. The whole thing with America is that

you take that personal experience and add to it and in essence you change it. Frankly, America is changing. It isn't so white as it used to be.

**Q:** I am curious as to how 1.5 and second generation see adoption. We pretty much know how the first generation feels about adoptees. They feel guilty and they feel ashamed for letting that happen.

**John:** I can only speak personally from my 1.5 generation. The first generation's attitude is so backwards. That has to do with their face and honor. Nothing to do with reality. I'm sorry they feel that way. In many ways it's that backwardness and insularity that has kept Korea down for so long. It doesn't really have to do with true honor; it is a facade.

**Q:** What do you mean?

**John:** Either they had the will to take care of the children or they didn't. The fact is that they couldn't do it but they wanted to look like they could. The shame only comes in when an outsider points that out. That's where it's complete denial.

**Q:** Koreans don't consider adoptees as "true Korean" whatever that means. Would you consider marrying a Korean adoptee?

**John:** I would not consider marrying based on anything besides that person.

**Lincoln:** It doesn't matter what color you are.

**HanJoo:** I can't imagine myself marrying anyone besides a Korean.

**John:** Is that you or your family?

**HanJoo:**

It's me. I would not feel comfortable living with somebody that doesn't share that common experience.

**Julie:** I always thought I was going to marry a white guy. But I never kept my

mind closed to it. I would have dated anybody but I always thought I would marry a white person because of the way I was raised.

**Esther:** I do agree that culture has a certain binding element to it. Yes I'm attracted to Asian Americans. But for myself, I don't feel as if I have to marry a Korean American.

**John:** I find this fascinating because I think it has more to do with that you guys are younger and when you went to school and where you went to school. I had never dated a Korean woman and it had nothing to do with personal choices. - just who was available. I graduated from high school in '78. Then, there were practically no other Koreans to speak of. So if I wanted to date, I had no choice but to date a non-Korean.

**Lincoln:** I told myself when I was dating that it would be nice to marry a Korean.

**Kalee:** My sister is dating a Korean American guy. When they first started dating, his parents were like "what's going on." Now they are totally cool with her.



Esther Kang



John Lee

**HanJoo:** I know my parents would have a major problem if I was dating an adoptee. Even for myself, I would question it because while I was growing up the whole notion of adoption had been framed in my mind as so negative.

**John:** I think historically you would be hard pressed to find a group of people who have been more insular than Koreans. I look at it now as a weakness because national borders mean less and less everyday. People who cannot deal with other people will be left behind. The market is going to move on and the more we think that we're special and unique, the more the world is going to prove us wrong.

The problem with the Korean American community is that of a brain drain. People you want in here — they couldn't care less about Korean American issues. At most they might say, "if you get me interested in it and get involved in it, fine. But do I need to? No." I don't. I could go out to the mainstream and function just fine. How strong is that glue that binds us? It's not like the glue that binds the African American community.

**Prumeh:** Even though the bond might not be as strong as that of the

African American community, the potential to bond a community is there. The problem is that we are limiting the scope of the Korean American community to the first generation. Personally, I think adoptees are a huge part of the Korean American community. The first generation is becoming a minority. We need to start thinking about different ideas of what our community is.

**Q:** How strong is your glue to the community?

**Julie:** I feel I'm outside the Korean community because of my language barrier. I feel I'm outside the white community because of my skin color.

**Q:** Would you feel more comfortable in an English-speaking Korean community?

**Julie:** I would. But unless I had a reason to, I wouldn't bond.

**John:** As I said, the need has to be there. If it isn't there, it's not going to happen. If it's there, you can facilitate it. I'm curious to see if it's there among English-speaking Korean Americans.

**Prumeh:** I remember that Dietrich Boenhoffer, a Christian theologian, once wrote something to the degree that community is not something that we strive to build but something that already exists,


whether we recognize it or not. Community is something everyone needs, whether it be social, economic, or political. But I really believe that there is a Korean American community that I can belong to.

**Kevin:** It's that we are having problems dealing with people who have grown up in a different system than we have. But we must figure out a way to emulate their strong, bonding force. I also think that there is a need for a Korean American organization, more than we are willing to recognize. There are some issues that wouldn't have risen if we had strong political clout. So far, we haven't changed the mainstream.

**Esther:** I think we have assimilated pretty well.

**Kevin:** Well, when we start demanding more and keep pushing the glass ceiling up, are they going to be so willing to look at us in such a positive light?

**Julie:** I would be willing to contribute to the Korean American community if I could understand the strong hold amongst Korean Americans.

**Kalee:** I think it's important to have the Korean American community, but also try to assimilate into America. It's difficult. 



# A FATHER'S FEARS

By Steve Ford

My 2-year-old daughter is drifting off to sleep in the next room, surrounded by stuffed animals, tiny soiled tennis shoes and other flotsam of a busy day. I pause every so often and listen. Sometimes she'll hear me pecking away at the keyboard and call out for another sip of juice, or just a hug.

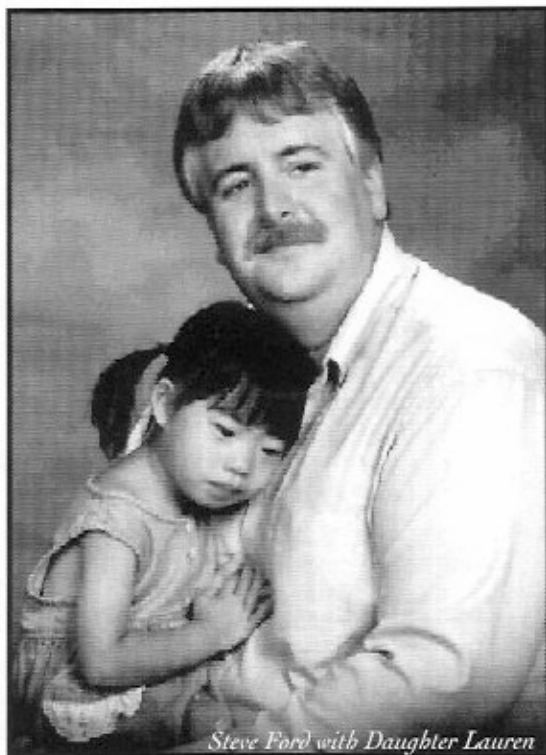
She came into my life as a sleeping infant wrapped in a pink blanket. My wife kissed her tiny cheeks and cried while I looked on in bewildered silence. The escort shook my hand and gave me a small blue bag. It contained various medical documents, a passport, a cassette of Korean children's songs and tiny packets of Korean baby formula. "Congratulations, Dad," she said with a grin. (Strange as it might seem, I treasure that nondescript bag as an artifact of my daughter's "birth." I even kept the formula.)

Like any proud parent, I couldn't wait to show my child to the world. I particularly enjoyed trips to the local mall. I'd bundle my daughter into a "belly bag," slip the straps over my shoulders, and parade from store to store. She would bounce happily with every step and I would beam with pride, soaking up the compliments of clerks and shoppers.

I've never referred to her as my adopted daughter. If anyone asks, I identify her as my daughter—period. That answer doesn't satisfy everyone, and I understand their confusion. They don't see my daughter the way I do. When I gaze into her eyes I don't see a Korean toddler with Asian features, only my daughter's face. The concept of race is irrelevant between us; only pure parental love remains. But out of that love comes fear—fear of the future and what it might bring.

I know the day will arrive when she'll

run to me in tears, sobbing because another child has hurled a racial epithet, or mocked the fact that she was adopted. At the community pool this summer, a little boy stared curiously and asked,



Steve Ford with Daughter Lauren

"What's wrong with her eyes?" That question is innocent enough now, but the ones that she'll hear in future years won't be.

In time she'll begin to wonder about her birthmother. With a child's logic she might conclude that she was given up because she was "bad." Or she might become fearful that her birthmother is going to snatch her away like an avenging angel.

And when she becomes an adult, she may want to search for her birthmother. This isn't fearful prospect, but it does cause deep concern. I'll need to make sure she understands that the desire to

meet her birthmother is not a betrayal of her parents. Moreover, I want to be certain that I'll be in a position to help her search succeed.

With all these possibilities in mind, I often find myself looking ahead, trying to anticipate problems and devise solutions. Interpreting the future is always a fool's game; nothing is entirely predictable. You simply do the best you can and hope that the choices you've made are the right ones.

Our first step was to join an international adoptive families group composed mostly of families who've adopted from Korea. We get together for parties and playgroups so that our children will understand that "transracial" families are perfectly normal—and not at all uncommon.

We've purchased books about Korea and we read them to her whenever possible. I collect information about Korean "culture camps" in our area. On the issue of culture, however, I've received words of caution from other Korean adoptees. One adoptee (who is also a child psychologist) advised me not to "overdo Korea." She said, "You can't create a genuine

Korean culture in your home and it would be futile to try. If you push Korean culture too much, your daughter may wonder why you're going to such great lengths to make her feel different from you. Remember: She is your daughter first, and a Korean American second." Perhaps the solution is to introduce Korean culture in small portions, and watch for signs of interest.

We've already begun telling her the story of how she came to be with us. She loves looking through photo albums, so I often take advantage of the opportunity. As we leaf through the pages together, I point to photographs sent by the agency before her arrival.



"See this one? This is the woman in Korea who took care of you [her foster mother] until you could come to live with Mommy and Daddy." If I ask where she was born, my daughter will point to the sky and reply, "Korea!" At this point I think Korea is somehow equivalent to "heaven" in her mind!

The tightrope walk really begins when she starts asking about her birthmother. Every psychologist I've spoken with has warned us to use great care in this area. A birthmother should never be portrayed as unkind or uncaring—that's obvious. But it is also risky to depict her as a saint. That fuels runaway fires of fantasy in a child, creating expectations that can never be fulfilled. The middle path is simply the truth: "When you were born, your mother was unable to take care of you. She loved you and she wanted you to be safe and happy. That's why she allowed us to become your parents."

And what if she does decide to search for her birthmother? We're doing our best to plan for this possibility as well. What little information we have about her birthmother is stored in a safety deposit box. I want to ensure that it will be there when my daughter needs it. In addition, I'm putting away a little of each paycheck in a special account I call the Search Fund. By the time she graduates from college—I hope she'll postpone any attempt until then—there should be more than enough money to pay for research, airfare, hotels and so on. In fact, there should be enough to pay for all of us to go to Korea, if that is her wish.

My favorite fantasy is that my daughter will ask us to come with her. My wife and I have every reason to be grateful to her birthmother and we hope to thank her in person. Had it not been for the love of this anonymous Korean woman, we would never have known the joy of

being our daughter's parents. I want to show her that the decision she made was not in vain. I want to be there when she sees the happy, confident adult her child has become.

That meeting is probably 20 years away. By then, I'll be an old man about to retire. This keyboard will probably be replaced with a speech translator and my PC will be the size of a matchbox. Our family won't fly to Seoul on a 747, we'll ride a hypersonic transport—just two hours from New York to Korea, nonstop.

But at least one thing will never change—I'll still be my daughter's father and she will be the center of my universe.

*Steve Ford is the Managing Editor of QST magazine. He lives with his wife Kathleen and daughter Lauren in New England. They maintain a Web page devoted to families who have adopted children from Korea. The address is [http://our-world.compuerve.com/homepage/S\\_Ford5/](http://our-world.compuerve.com/homepage/S_Ford5/).*

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## SACRIFICE

*here is my body  
broken for you*

formed  
by what they gave me  
body  
face  
mind  
and heart

but neither a name  
nor a home  
both  
replaced  
without haste

only this shape  
these moles  
and odd-shaped fingers  
the propensity for scars  
both outside and in  
these things  
they gave me

internal incantations  
gurgle up from within

*here is my body  
broken for you*

*split open  
twice  
for your life  
and for mine*

what she may have said  
then  
what echoes  
throughout my blood  
now  
is  
sacrifice

—Tonya Sookhee Bishoff

## RETURN

I return  
without regression  
without regret

I return  
with the morning  
to commence my  
own mourning

I return  
to this adopted land  
I call my own  
with a tongue  
full of language  
I can fully  
understand

I return  
to the home land  
the Mother land  
and learn to feel the  
loss  
of the one I called  
Omoni

I return  
to this land  
the soil  
thick and red  
and as  
water runs  
through it—  
it spreads wider  
and  
seeps deeper  
like tears through  
dried blood

and this morning calm  
this calm and somber  
mourning  
commences  
and I fear I will  
never call it to cease

—Tonya Sookhee Bishoff

*Tonya Sookhee Bishoff, born in Seoul, was adopted at the age of 16 months. She has a BA in English from UC-Berkeley and an MA in English from Chapman University. She currently works as a publication editor in Irvine, California. ["RETURN" was published in Writing Away Here: A Korean American Anthology.]*

## EXCHANGE

Born unto two  
Realities, two cultures: too different.  
You and me.  
Crying silent tears while attempting to  
Exchange American branches for  
Korean roots.  
Is it possible?  
Maybe.

Jo Rankin

## BIOLOGICAL MOTHER

You tried your best  
To cut the cord—  
Destroyed a nest  
Beyond afford.  
My fate was filed  
And soon defined:  
A lonely child  
You left behind.  
Since you and I  
Will never be  
Together in  
Reality,  
Should I go on  
And try to solve  
The questions which  
Have since evolved,  
Or should I quit  
While I'm ahead,  
And try to do  
Without, instead?  
Such simple words  
For mother's pearl.  
From me, with love,  
Your Incheon girl.

Jo Rankin

*Jo Rankin was born in Incheon, Korea in 1967, adopted by American parents in 1970, and raised in San Diego. She graduated from San Diego State University with a degree in Journalism. She currently works for a TV station in Los Angeles. In 1994, she co-founded the Association of Korean Adoptees (a.k.a.).*

Film Still from "Undertow" © 1996 by Me K. Abn

## To Our Son and the Sun

On the day your eyes first saw the sun, something within me stirred.  
 The moon shone where we lived, and there was a sadness in our home.  
 You did not know sadness, but struggled to grow and thrive.  
 You absorbed all you could of the Land of the Morning Calm before you were gently brought to us.  
 You had never seen the sadness of the moon until you came to us.  
 Everything was new and different; even the sun in the winter you had not yet known was not the same.  
 We struggled, too, wrestling with a name for you.  
 The name we gave you means "a gift from God," describing what you mean to us.  
 You brought us a brighter sun to our lives with all the joy we feel in watching you grow.  
 Many sunny days have passed since the day you came to be forever our son.  
 The sun is brighter now because of the spark you bring every day.

Roberta L. Wheatley

*The Wheatleys adopted Nathan when he was eight months old. He is now a third grader at Ben Franklin Elementary School in Glen Ellyn, Illinois.*

Dear Luuk,

As a writer, I usually am not at a loss for written words — but I struggle now to find a way to reach you.

My night's dark calm has been disturbed by troubling thoughts since your death. The light of my days has revealed unsettling conclusions.

Driving home in the throngs of rush-hour gridlock on the day I received news of your death, I could only think of your pain through my tears. I never thought to wonder, "why?" I only wished I could have carried the weight of your anguish for you.

I may never understand why you ended your life, Luuk, but I do understand your need to find peace.

Being adopted Korean is far more complex than choosing racial designation. You knew that.

The struggles of racial identity cannot be solved at culture camps, outreach events, panel discussions or trips to our birth country. They cannot be described as growing pains nor diagnosed with color-blind love. We both discovered that for ourselves.

Our search for ourselves does not have an end — neither does the pain. You saw

that, but what you couldn't see was a way to ease the difficulty of your earthly journey. Somewhere along the way, you forgot to open your eyes and catch a glimpse of hope.

A friend recently commented that we, as adopted Koreans, live a lie. In order to assimilate into not only a white society, but also our own adoptive families, we learn to see ourselves as others want to see us. We turn our lies into betrayal — of ourselves.

Maybe you got tired of wearing your mask. Maybe you forgot who existed beneath the weight of that facade.

You and I, Luuk, have traveled so far — and for what?

I have heard parents comment that adopting Korean children is an enriching cultural experience and that other adults should do the same.

Those parents must not understand that the price they paid for us was insignificant compared to the price we pay to fit into their world.

Society already has told you and me that we have become Americans because of someone else's charity. Now we're being told that our cultural displacement had a purpose — multiculturalism. By growing up in white families, we can be examples, Luuk. We can show others that racial harmony is possible. We just can't show our

burdened backs.

We allay our parents' fears by internalizing our own.

I guess someone forgot to ask us if we wanted to be America's diversity mascots.

Luuk, I think about you every day. I am reminded of you when I look in the mirror. I see the reflection of your morality in my eyes and the eyes of other adopted Korean children and adults.

And I still see a flicker of hope.

Maybe there is a reason for all of this, but I refuse to turn your suicide into a martyr's message. You sacrificed too much of yourself in life; I won't take away what is left of you in death.

I hope you have found your peace, friend

Kari. (- Kari Ruth)

*Kari Ruth graduated from Arizona State University in '95 with a BA in Journalism. She is currently doing free-lance work while taking Korean language classes. She is also a board member of MAK.*

*This letter appeared in the August/September edition of Minnesota Adopted Koreans' newsletter as a tribute to its former member, Luuk Wabala.*

"Turning Asian" by Me K. Ahn



# Personal Profiles

Many Korean American Adoptees are now successful professionals in various fields. Here, we introduce some of them.

**Paul Shin**



As a successful businessman, teacher, and former Washington State legislator, Paul Shin has led a life paralleled by few. Abandoned at the age of four, Shin grew up as a street urchin, fending for himself on the streets of Seoul, Korea. When the Korean War erupted in 1950, Shin worked as a house-

boy for the U.S. Army and met an American dentist, Dr. Ray Paull, who adopted Shin and brought him to the United States at the age of 16. In an act of respect and deference to his new father, Shin adopted Paull as his first name.

When Shin arrived in America, he had very little formal education. However, after earning his high school diploma by passing the GED test, Shin was prompted to pursue higher education. He was successful in earning a BA, two Master's, and a Ph.D. In between and after his formal studies, Shin pursued teaching, which carried him to the University of Maryland, Brigham Young University, and Shoreline Community College.

Shin eventually settled in Washington State. There, Shin sought to apply his knowledge and skills to matters close to his heart: providing economic opportuni-

ties for the residents of his home state. Initially, Shin served under numerous governors in the area of international trade. However, Shin quickly found his niche in the political arena. In Shin's first run at political office, he was elected as a legislator in the Washington State House of Representatives from 1993 to 1994.

The 1996 race for lieutenant governor in Washington showcased his popularity from not just the Korean American community but the community as a whole. In his first bid for the position, Shin received 22% of the votes among 14 candidates. (He lost the election by only a 0.6% margin.) Paul Shin's success is not unrelated to his pioneering vision — improving the position of the community through people, programs, and ideas that include and integrate Eastern values and culture into Western civilization. **WE**

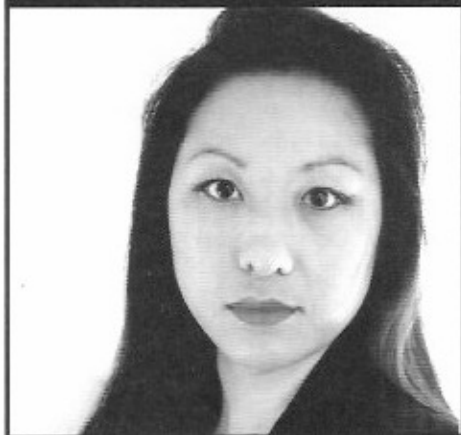
Deborah H. Johnson, born in Seoul, Korea, is a social worker, family counselor, and adoption/diversity consultant and trainer. She was adopted at the age of four and currently resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota with her two children.

Johnson has been nationally recognized as an expert on the issues of adoption and identity development for transracially/internationally adopted children. She has been featured on several network and cable television and radio programs addressing adoption. She is also a regular speaker at national adoption conferences and is a past president of the board of directors for Adoptive Families of America.

Over the past 15 years, she has addressed various audiences including Yale University's East Rock Institute, IDS Financial Services, University of Minnesota's Family Social Science Department, University of Utah's Ethnic Studies Department, other adoption agencies, and parent and adoptee support groups across the nation. She also escorts a tour of Korea for adoptees and their families through the Korean Ties Program.

Johnson devotes several weeks each summer to teaching self-esteem classes at various Korean culture camps in the Midwest and East Coast areas. She believes that her greatest rewards come through her work with adopted children.

**Deborah H. Johnson**



She feels that her work and knowledge is based on the insights and wisdom gained through the voices of these children. **WE**

## Mimi McAndrews



**M**imi McAndrews was born in Missouri in 1956 and was adopted by German-Irish parents. She graduated from Florida Atlantic University with a Bachelor of Arts in Communications and went on to earn her law degree from Georgetown University Law Center. At Georgetown, McAndrews served as the president of the Asian Pacific American Law

Students Association (APALSA). After completing law school in 1992, she returned to Florida where she successfully ran for office for the Florida Legislature. She served two years as the State Representative for District 85 in Palm Beach County. Mimi McAndrews was the first Asian American woman ever to be elected to the Florida Legislature.

McAndrews says her birthparents were students from Korea attending college in Missouri in the 1950's. She believes that her birthparents gave her up for adoption because of the shame they may have felt for having a baby as an unwed couple, who presumably were from families of high social status in Korea.

McAndrews thinks her father eventually went back to Korea after his studies while her mother stayed in the U.S. McAndrews has tried to locate her birthparents but says she soon became reluctant to continue her search. When she became elected to the Florida state legislature in

1992, her story was reported by local Korean American press. She, then, began receiving phone calls from Koreans who told her not to publicize her search because it could hurt her parents' current reputation. McAndrews thinks she knows who her birthmother is and where she lives, but couldn't go on with her search actively. She says, however, she is still eager to meet her birthparents.

McAndrews is currently an attorney concentrating on government law, contracts, employment law, and bankruptcy law. She is active in the community and serves on the Area Agency for Aging Advisory Council, the Crestwood Performing Arts League, and the Asian American Federation. She is also the co-founder and president of the Asian Pacific American Bar Association of South Florida, and a member of both the Florida Bar Association and the Palm Beach County Bar Association. **WE**

**B**orn in Pusan, Korea, in 1953 as Suh Oong-Ki, Thomas Masters does not recall what happened to his birthfather, but does remember that his birthmother died when he was five, leaving him and his older brother and sister behind. Shortly after the death of his mother, Masters was sent to an orphanage in Korea. He is uncertain about the fate of his brother and sister, but has been searching for them for twenty years.

At the age of six, Masters was adopted by Cecil and Mary Ellen Masters of Wichita, Kansas. He received his BS degree from Wichita State University and his law degree from the University of Kansas Law School, where he was Student Director of the Douglas County Legal Aid Society.

Since then, Masters has served in various management positions as a Special Agent with the FBI. In the

Intelligence Division, he managed the investigation of Southeast and Far East Asian countries involving national security issues. While in the Criminal Division of the FBI, Masters investigated Asian organized crime resulting in a successful prosecutions and seizures of contraband and cash.

Thomas Masters has also been active in business and civic organizations. He is the President and CEO of Columbus International, Inc., an international trade consulting company in New York. He is also a member of the Korea Society and its Young Professional Council, a.k.a. of New York, and the Federal Asian Pacific American Heritage Council. More recently, Masters was appointed to the Board of Directors for the Korean Adoption Registry. He is also an active member of the Republican Party and served as New York State Vice Chairman for the "Dole for President" committee.

## Tom Masters



Among other honors, Masters was nominated for the Central Intelligence Director's Exceptional Collector National HUMINT Award as well as being the recipient of the Korean American of the Year from the Korean Association of Greater New York. **WE**

# Organization Profiles

## also-known-as, inc.

"also known as" (a.k.a.) is a New York-based group consisting of adult adopted Korean Americans seeking to give expression to the national community of intercountry and transracial adoptees and people of mixed racial heritage. According to one of its founders, Hollee McGinnis, their name symbolizes their hidden identities and aliases that speak of their experiences which transcend assumptions of race and culture.

a.k.a. started out as a mentorship program in July, 1996 with 35 adult adoptees who wanted to provide guidance to younger adopted Koreans. However, recognizing the new generation of intercountry adoptees, most recently from China, a.k.a. has since shifted its focus to include all people whose lives bridge nations, culture, and nations.

As a community, a.k.a. aims to generate a space in which people have the freedom

to know themselves and their culture, shattering the assumptions of racial and



cultural stereotypes, igniting the possibility of joy and relatedness among people of different cultures and races.

a.k.a. believes that the experiences of intercountry and transcultural adoptees

are a bold statement of what is possible; that they, as human beings, can shift their minds and hearts to embrace one another as a daughter or a son, a sister or a brother. McGinnis, who recently went back to Korea and met her biological parents, states, "We are the possibility of the global family today."

For more information, contact Hollee McGinnis at hollee2848@aol.com or visit a.k.a. website at <http://www.aka.org>.

## Korean Adoption Registry

The Korean Adoption Registry is a non-profit organization that allows adopted Koreans to register into a permanent database. The Registry was founded by Wayne Berry. Berry is a Korean American adoptee who, after many frustrating years of searching for his birthparents, finally found them in the summer 1995. Berry proceeded to develop the Registry to support other Korean American adoptees also seeking their biological families. Berry, who is taking time



off from his high school teaching job in Minnesota, is currently spending nine months in Korea to learn the language and culture.

According to Berry, the Registry's objective is to reunite as many families as possible, although there is no guarantee that every adoptee will find their birthparents. Although how much information a person has regarding their adoption is an important starting point, it still takes years of struggles and work to search for birthparents.

Because most people do not have the time and know-how to conduct the search, the Korean Adoption Registry hopes to do

much of the time-consuming work.

Once registered, a file is kept in a database until the adoptee wants it removed. The Korean Adoption Registry is in the process of being established in Korea as well, where biological families can register if they are in search of their own family member or members that were placed into adoptive families. The cost of registering with the Korean Adoption Registry is \$30.00 which covers processing and handling fees.

For more information, call 1-800-KOREA-34 or write to:

Korean Adoption Registry  
14735 Highway 65 NE  
Ham Lake, MN 55304



## The Association of Korean Adoptees (A.K.A.)

The Association of Korean Adoptees (A.K.A.) is a Los Angeles-based adoptee support group with 70 members on its mailing list. Co-founded by Jo Rankin and Basilio Zanda in 1994, A.K.A. provides emotional, social and cultural support to adult Korean adoptees and their associates through informal discussion and special events. Their goals are to increase an understanding of interracial adoption to the general public as well as to serve as a link between Korean American adoptees and the Korean American community.

A.K.A. members were born in Korea but raised all over the world. With the average age ranging from 20-45, most are professionals or college students living in Southern California. Despite its short history, A.K.A. has built an impressive network of outside supporters. Guest speakers have included

social workers, adoptive parents, birth parents, psychologists, book authors, documentary producers, and representatives from related organizations. A.K.A. has received coverage in the Korea Times, Radio Korea (KBLA), KoreAm Journal and the Los Angeles Times. They are also included in several web pages.

A.K.A. distributes a monthly newsletter and welcomes articles and special event announcements or other related material. Jo Rankin and Tonya Bishoff are currently working on an independent project, collecting poetry, fiction, non-fiction, essays and interviews for an anthology by and about Korean American adoptees regarding



all aspects of the adoptee's perspectives and experiences. The anthology has been mentioned in five national publications. Its deadline is March 31, 1997. For anthology submissions or for more information about A.K.A., please write to:

1208 N. Brand Blvd.  
Glendale, CA 91202.

## Minnesota Adopted Koreans (MAK)



The mission of MAK is to assist its members as they search for and develop racial identities by providing them with a supportive and interactive community. MAK also focuses its efforts

on extending understanding and knowledge about Korean adoption to the community and empowering adopted Korean Americans and their families and friends. In existence for 5 years, MAK currently has over 180 adoptee members while its entire mailing directory totals over 300. The majority of MAK's members are in their twenties.

MAK's social and cultural activities have helped many of its members and their families share resources in a warm environment. MAK's monthly social activities have included bowling trips, rollerblading,

volleyball and softball tournaments, weekend camping trips, discussion groups, and the ever popular holiday dance. In the past two years, MAK has also held an outreach event for families with adopted Korean children. The event consists of a Korean dinner for the parents and games for the children.

As an organization MAK is in a transitional period with older members moving on and new members stepping forward. The board is currently discussing new directions for the future that will probably include a mentor program for young adopted Korean American teens and moving toward a more educational/awareness programming on adoption and identity issues. Presently, the board's aim is to have only adopted Korean Americans on the board but keep membership open to families, friends, and spouses.

For more information, call  
(612) 305-2892

Camp Pride-Korea was initiated eleven years ago by a group of adoptive parents in an effort to help their adopted Korean children and their siblings learn about and celebrate their Korean heritage. Camp Pride-Korea is sponsored by the Chicago Area Families For Adoption (CAFFA), a non-profit umbrella organization providing support, networking and assistance for adoptive families. Participation in Camp Pride-Korea has grown from about twenty five active children in its first year to 152 school age children and 10 nursery school age children from 97 different families. The majority of the families are from the Chicagoland area along with families participating from southern Illinois and Indiana.

Camp Pride-Korea is staffed by a group of parent volunteers who serve as classroom teachers, cooks, and counselors, and care takers, for the younger children. There are also volunteer Korean American teachers who teach Korean language, cul-

ture, music, and traditional Korean dance. The children are taught the Korean alphabet, basic Korean phrases, and Korean songs.

Camp Pride-Korea also has a Tae-Kwon-Do instructor who instructs the children on basic Tae-Kwon-Do and performs a T a e - K w o n - D o demonstration. The curriculum materials have been developed over the years and are intended to provide the children with a range of information about Korean history and culture.

Many of the children attend schools where being Korean makes them a very conspicuous minority. Thus some of the activities are designed to enhance self-esteem and self-confidence. As a bonus, campers enjoy the unique experience of being in the major-

## Camp Pride-Korea



ity group during the week-long camp. However, the central purpose of the camp is still to have fun and educate the whole family about Korea.

For more information, contact Don Sibley at (708) 848-2840.

Based in Sacramento, California, Friends of Korea is a non-profit organization whose purpose is to promote a greater awareness and appreciation of the value of Korean heritage in the United States to those who are interested. It's an organization that evolved from the need of adoptive parents to "stand in relation to the Korean community." One of its founders, Chris Winston, notes: "We [saw] the needs of the Korean community and [tried] to meet those needs while meeting our own." Hence, its board of directors consists not



only of adoptive parents and adult Korean American adoptees, but also first and second generation Korean Americans and those in interethnic marriages.

Friends of Korea's goal to serve the mutual needs of its members is well

reflected in its activities:

- Korean Language and Culture Institute - Classes on Korean culture and language are held during the school year.
- English Classes for Korean

Immigrants - Free English classes for Korean immigrants. The curriculum was

developed by adoptive parents who are ESL teachers.

• Friends of Korea Discussion Group - The group discusses topics of interest, including political, cultural, interethnic, and adoption issues.

• Summer Student Exchange Program - This summer, Friends of Korea brought eight high school students from Korea to stay with American families for two weeks. Winston writes, "As evidenced by the tears shed between families and students at parting, the program has been highly successful in building strong relationships."

Friends of Korea is sharing resources with others who want Korean connections around the world and wants to help others across the country to set up programs similar to those piloted in Sacramento.

For more information, contact Friends of Korea at (916) 933-1447 or visit its web page at <http://members.aol.com/ForKorea>.


## Children's Home Society of Minnesota

For more than 100 years the Children's Home Society of Minnesota has provided adoption services, post adoption counseling, intermediary services, workshops, and support groups. Many of its current services are geared specifically for children adopted from Korea and their families.

Counseling Services address a variety of adoption issues including parenting concerns and cultural identity. Korean Intermediary Services assist families in obtaining information about their child's Korean origins. The pre-teen and teen groups offer members the chance to explore Korean culture and child rearing traditions, consider adoption and birth parent choices in Korea, and learn self-empowerment skills to reinforce their sense of pride in their Korean heritage. For younger children, a Korean Children's Day is offered each spring. This event emulates a traditional Korean celebration. All enjoy a traditional Korean meal; children then listen to Korean folktales, play Korean games and make Korean crafts while their parents attend an adoption-focused presentation.

Each summer the Children's Home Society offers tours to Korea for children who have been adopted from Korea and their families. The trip begins in Seoul with visits to cultural sites including the Royal Palace and Secret Garden. Families also visit a Korean folk village and the historic Haeinsa area. There is also a possibility for families to meet with their child's birth relative or foster parent.

Children's Home Society post adoption staff has current information available and serves as a referral source for families seeking Korean cultural opportunities.

For more information on any of Children's Home Society's Korean focused adoption services, contact: Jeff Mondloh at (612) 646-6393 or visit the web site at <http://www.chsm.com>. 

## Camp Sejong

Each summer in New Jersey, Camp Sejong provides a chance for Korean adoptees from ages 4 to 17 to learn and celebrate Korean culture. Camp Sejong was founded in 1991 by Lindy Gelber, an adoptive mother, who saw in her adopted daughter, Jessica, a certain uneasiness around Asians. Gelber recognized that Jessica would have trouble identifying herself as a Korean American if she weren't exposed to Korean culture.

Since then, Camp Sejong has become one of the most successful Korean culture camps in the U.S., attracting a steady stream of 100 to 200 adoptees each year. Many prominent figures have also volunteered to spend time with the children: Chanhoo Park, pitcher of the L.A. Dodgers, Jim Paek, the first Asian American to play in the National Hockey League, and Lily Lee, an Olympic figure skater.

Gelber says Camp Sejong also helps adoptive parents share their children's experience exploring their heritage. Gelber, who believes transracial adoption helps reduce racism, stresses that it

is important for the adoptive parents to give positive messages and a cultural balance to their adopted children by celebrating their children's culture. "I don't experience life as a white person anymore," she adds.

Currently, some of its campers are practicing Korean folk music and will perform in Macy's Parade in February of 1997. Gelber says Camp Sejong is in need of the Korean American community's support more than ever. They need to buy costumes and sang-mo (a hat with ribbon attached) to present a Korean traditional music and dance performed by Korean American adoptees for chuseok (Korean harvest festival) in 1997. Emphasizing the need for cultural identity, Gelber proudly shows a letter she received from a 15-year-old camper, which reads: "I've learned so much about my country, my heritage, my peers, and most of all, MYSELF. Without your camp, I wouldn't be the self-assured, strong growing person I am today."

To contact Camp Sejong, please call Lindy Gelber at (201) 784-1081. 