

KOREAN AMERICAN  
CIVIC EMPOWERMENT  
FOR COMMUNITY INC.  
New York, New Jersey

# GRASSROOTS

*Korean American Civic Empowerment - Grassroots Internship Journal*

2025 KACE GRASSROOTS  
INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

*ISSUE No.4*

## Our Stories

First-hand reflections on the Korean-American experience from our Interns.

## Interviews

Stories of the Korean-American experience.

## Field Research

A presentation of findings based on independent research conducted by the Interns.

## Opinions

The thoughts and concerns from our Interns regarding current events and politics.



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship in Washington, D.C., meeting with Mr. Kenneth Lee, Esq. (Sen. Ted Cruz's Office) and Ms. Anna Song (Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand's Office) [July 16, 2025]; (Photo by Jiwon Kim, KACE).





*The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship meeting with Senator Andy Kim [July 16, 2025]; (Photo by Richard In, Esq., KACE).*

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**About the KACE Grassroots Internship Program:** Since its launch in 2004, over 300 high school students throughout New Jersey and New York have joined our annual high school internship program. Our 2025 program is open to high school students of all backgrounds that are interested in contributing to our community’s civic empowerment in New York and New Jersey. Through this program, Interns learn the importance of registering new voters, issues facing the Korean American community today, and the process of organizing and mobilizing the Korean American community. Under supervision, Interns research and lead public campaigns to raise awareness of various important issues. Interns also have the opportunity to meet with elected officials and engage with members of the local, state, and federal legislature. Our program is specifically devoted to developing all the inherent skills of our interns as they go out and experience firsthand what it takes to help and support the community. Students with demonstrated interest in public policy, politics, and history are encouraged to apply. To learn more, such as the application process, please visit our website: <https://kace.org/internship/>

**About This Journal:** Our high school interns completed several research and writing assignments throughout the KACE Grassroots Internship Program. This journal contains some of those submissions, and serves as a time capsule of their thoughts and experiences. It is my hope that future Interns and members of the Korean American community will benefit from these different perspectives from all walks of life and circumstances from their formative years in the grand diaspora of our shared heritage, culture, and history. - Richard In, Esq.

# OUR STORIES

## A Name That Doesn't Fit The Box By Shiloh Kim

My name is Shiloh Kim. Two words, three syllables, and a lifetime of explaining. When people hear Shiloh, they usually pause. Their eyes flicker with surprise, and they try to mask it with a smile. Then they see Kim, and they hesitate again. "Shiloh... Kim?" they repeat, like the two don't belong together. Like my name is a puzzle that doesn't quite fit.

Growing up as a Korean American, I got used to that pause. It came during roll call, new classrooms, and even introductions to other Korean kids. My first name didn't sound Korean, yet my last name didn't sound American. I always sat somewhere in between—just like my identity.

People asked questions. "Is that your real name?" "Do you have a Korean name too?" "How do you even pronounce your name?" I used to laugh it off, pretending it didn't bother me every time I got bombarded with questions about my name. But deep down, I wondered: Why did my parents have to name me with such a name? Should I go by a different name?

As a child, I seriously envied classmates with more common, typical names like Emily, Sarah, or Isabella, names that teachers never stumbled over or didn't get follow-up questions. I thought those names made life easier and wondered if having one would make me feel more accepted, more "American." It wasn't until fourth grade, when I was drawing with my mom, that I asked her what my name meant. My mom explained to me that Shiloh was a Hebrew name that means "peace" and "tranquility." They named me Shiloh because they hoped I would carry strength and

calmness in a world that would throw challenges at my face.

"Mom, what about Kim?" I asked further.

"Kim? Kim is one of the most historically significant and widely recognized Korean surnames."

As she told me that my name tells a story—not just of me, but of the two worlds I live in—I realized that it was silly of me to hate my name.

My revelation started once I realized something powerful: my name isn't something to be embarrassed of. It's one of my proudest possessions. It makes me stand out and makes me who I am today. It reflects the complexity of being Korean American—fitting in, standing out, and navigating through two cultures at once. And most importantly, it reminds me that I should be proud of what I'm called.

Now, I embrace that same pause. I say my name clearly. I don't flinch when people ask about it—I answer with confidence. Because Shiloh Kim is not a contradiction. It's a balance. It's the result of months of my parent's thinking. It's Korean and American. It's tradition and individuality. It's simply who I am—me.

I've matured to learn that there is power in a name that makes people think and wonder. That there's meaning in a name that doesn't follow the script. And that there's history in a name that carries two cultures in three syllables.

So yes, my name is Shiloh Kim. And if it makes people pause, laugh, or frown, that's okay. That name is basically a long story that has been compressed into two words—one that I've learned how to tell proudly.



The first in-person meeting of the 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship at the New York office for continued orientation. [June 27, 2025]; (Photo by Richard In, Esq., KACE).

## My Greatest Skill By Rachel You

My greatest skill is writing emails. Professional tone, proper format, and perfect grammar. I have mastered all these skills by the ripe age of seven. While my classmates were learning how to write silly fiction stories, I searched up YouTube tutorials on writing emails, trying to grasp every little detail on how to formulate the perfect email.

My mother continuously reminds me that "we came here for a better future"; this seven-word phrase has, over time, become embedded in my head. Our establishment in America was sewn from my father's sweat and my mother's tears. However, this phrase of encouragement also carried much emotional weight, of disappointment, comparison, and regret.

These sentiments were imposed internally, not externally. My mother has never explicitly pressured me to excel in school or bring home perfect scores. She preached trying to the best of your abilities, and accepting the yielding results. Nevertheless, watching my mother's tired eyes as she sets our dinner table after a long day at work brings me an untold responsibility: to succeed. Their jaded looks made me afraid of not living up to the expectations that my parents had abandoned their whole life in Korea for.

However, despite my efforts to please my mother with my excellent grades, she seemed to care about something else: my connection to my heritage. I have always found a contrast in my mother's and my beliefs. Growing up in an American society surely clashed with my mother's traditional Korean background. Whilst my mother set the dinner table full of colorful banchans, I came home, stomach full of McDonald's. My blinding, dyed hair and bright tank tops seemed to repel my mother, as she urged me to put on a hoodie to cover up my disgustingly embarrassing features. My efforts to put a smile on my mother's face seemed to have been lost in translation. Instead, she seemed to pick at every little flaw

she saw in me. This congested me with anger and disappointment, and my mother and I seemed to have been lost in translation. Instead, she seemed to pick at every little flaw she saw in me. This congested me with anger and disappointment, and my mother and I grew apart; both bitter and disarrayed.

Months of grudges and efforts to reconcile, yet our differences did not seem to die down. One day, my mother handed me her phone and started stating what she needed to include in her email. Although drowning in my own responsibility, I reluctantly took my mother's phone and started typing out the deeply familiar format. My eyes took in my mother's face, and her tired and lonely eyes were so distinctly noticeable. I realized then that I was her refuge. In a world full of unfamiliar language and people, I was the one person she could seek out. Our moment of connection seemed arbitrary, as we acknowledged our flaws, and more importantly, the love we had for each other.

I later learned that her biggest fear was not my lack of success or career, but her choice of coming to America, possibly putting a barrier between her and her children. I understood, only then, why she was so urgently pressing my Korean culture onto me. It was a response to her fear of being forgotten and misunderstood.

My cloak of embarrassment seemed to be rooted in my own insecurities. The irrational fear of being seen as a disappointment. I saw clearly now; my mother, who I felt so deeply veiled by, was the person who understood me the most.

So since then, as I get seated at my dinner table, eyes overwhelmed by the array of lively Korean foods, I appreciate my culture, my family, and most importantly, the sacrifices that brought me the opportunities I have today. I know, as I eat my food, no matter how much of a disappointment I am, how many imperfections I hold within me, or how many mistakes I make: there will always be someone rooting me on at home.



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship meeting with Rep. Tom Suozzi (top) and with Rep. Grace Meng (bottom) in Washington, D.C. [July 16, 2025]; (Photo by Dong Chan Kim, KACE).

# OUR STORIES



The first in-person meeting of the 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship at the New Jersey office for continued orientation. [June 25, 2025]; (Photo by Richard In, Esq., KACE).

## A Blend of Two Cultures By Alvin Lee

To the ordinary eye, a Korean is notable for their connection to cultural roots and traditions. A non-Asian may mention a Korean's enjoyment of "kimchi" or their high expectations of life. However, when someone asks me to define a Korean, I find it difficult to answer in one or two sentences. My Korean ethnicity is an integral part of my identity, connected with a multitude of experiences and realizations that shape who I am today.

Born as a Korean American, I only recognized or understood the "Korean" part of my label. Coming from parents who immigrated from South Korea, I was only immersed in Korean culture until elementary school. Eating Korean food like ramen and Choco Pie, learning formal decorum and manners like bowing down to every elder, and watching Korean TV shows like Pororo were among the many cultural practices I naturally adopted. Other norms included being scolded with Korean phrases and cleaning my room every day until it was spotless. I was immersed in emulating this Korean identity, crafting my personality and future self. However, I still didn't understand why I was called a "Korean American."

Upon entering my high school, I realized why I was also labeled American: I had the full American experience growing up. I "Americanized" myself, learning American slang and adjusting my dialect to fit in with my peers. However, the balance of my identity was now lopsided, as my time at school pulled me deeper into American culture and distanced

me from the Korean culture I had taken for granted. I realized I was naturally leaning toward American habits, except when I was at home. There was still that intuition of being a Korean, but it was becoming evident that I was drifting further away from it. I was still following the practices I was taught at a young age, such as craving Korean snacks or hearing the same scoldings every day, but the connection felt different. I was attending Korean school just to relearn Korean phrases and struggling to form longer sentences when on KakaoTalk video calls with my family members. Despite all, following both Korean and American cultures forms my identity, helping me appreciate and respect my heritage. There are aspects to feel proud of, but admirations also come with harsh realities.

Throughout my life, I faced racial remarks and cultural misunderstandings firsthand, along with conceptions based on the model minority myth. I was told assumptions, such as being labelled a different ethnicity, and I dedicated my life to studying. As I face racial generalizations, whether subtle or sensitive, I've learned to reflect and respond with understanding and embrace, understanding that these moments arise from unfamiliarity. I have learned to create these moments into opportunities, whether through community involvement or raising awareness of the Korean-American identity. These experiences from my youth to the present have shaped a complex identity, a blend of cultures I am proud and inspired to fight for. I realized it's not just about taking part in my inherited traditions, but also about understanding the identity created by bridging two unique cultures.

## K-pop and Its Influence on My Life By Audrey Hahn

Growing up, I was unknowingly exposed to K-pop whenever I was around others, especially my sister. Although I lived in Korea, I never paid much attention to K-pop culture myself. I was not old enough to understand the lyrics or have a musical preference, and I would rather watch cartoons and shows on TV. My sister, on the other hand, would watch music videos of boy groups like EXO and Wanna One, screaming with excitement and praising them. I would sit beside her, confused by her enthusiasm, but eventually, the songs she played so often became familiar. I started chanting along, not because I understood the lyrics or shared her passion, but by the catchy melodies.

When I moved to America four years ago during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, my relationship with K-pop began to slowly change. Transitioning to a new country was already difficult, and the pandemic made everything worse. The new culture and unfamiliar environment made it hard to settle in or make friends. I often felt disconnected not only from the people around me, but also from myself. Experiencing the disparity between my present and past years of comfortable life in Korea, where all of my childhood friends and relatives were living, I longed to visit Korea to find something that I felt was missing but could not be identified.

It was during this time that I began listening more intentionally to K-pop, hoping that I could find what was lingering behind me. Listening to it, I experienced how music, which I once had treated as background noise, changed me. K-pop became a friend who would encourage and advise me (Fighting by BSS) in hard times or sometimes tell me that it is okay to be stagnated or sometimes to laugh or cry, as it is part of life that anyone goes through (That's Okay by D.O. (EXO)). Through these transformative moments, I realized what was missing: a consolation for a big change in my life and a confirmation that

whatever I was going through, my ups and downs, it was fine to accept as it was. Thus, K-pop went beyond more than just music; in those lonely moments, it became a source of comfort.

While K-pop was something valuable to me, it was not the case for others. One day, as the school bell rang and I was rushing to put away my phone and unwired earphones, I forgot to pause the music. As the earphones disconnected, instantly, the phone blasted out a K-pop song at full volume, catching everyone's attention in class. At first, they were simply startled, but with the sound of Korean lyrics, some students began laughing. Decreasing the volume with my shaking hands, I was ashamed. Though I understood that it could be a laughable accident, it seemed like they were laughing at the music itself, at what was personal to me.

Still, K-pop was a relatable topic to my Korean community. A few months after the accident, as the Korean holiday Chuseok approached, our school's Korean Culture Club began planning a celebration. A group of students volunteered to perform a dance cover of the group Blackpink, and they asked me to join. Fearing I would experience the same embarrassment inside the classroom, I refused their request. On the day of the event, I helped as a volunteer, cleaning the stages after each performance. Eventually, the dance group performed, and after the performance, the audience burst into applause. Standing near the stage, I realized how much joy it brought and how the energy of the performers was transferred to the audience.

Today, K-pop remains a constant in my life. Talking to my parents and Korean American friends, I have learned how this genre is not just about entertainment. It represents different generations, carries stories, and connects people. It is my hope that K-pop continues to grow and be more well-known so that it can offer comfort and entertainment to others in their hard and good times, the same way it did for me.



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship at the Federal Hall National Museum, and meeting with Mr. Ravi Reddi from Senator Gillibrand's office. [July 10, 2025]; (Photos by Richard In, Esq., KACE).

# OUR STORIES

## A Letter to My Younger Self By Jayden Chang

Dear Jayden,

I know what you're thinking already: "Why do I need identity?" You've thought about this topic for so long. Why do people care so much about a simple label? Is there even a community that could accept me? Is this venture truly necessary? Identity, whether it be cultural, sexual, or anything else, gives you the framework for your beliefs and provides you with a sense of community. It's there when you feel down and pushes you to grow. Your parents have struggled with this problem, and so have their parents, and beyond. You're already going through it too.

Truth is, it hasn't hit you yet. One day, you're going to be questioning—scrambling for an answer—, searching for a crowd of people that you can relate to. You probably could already feel it now—being too Korean to be American and too American to be Korean. You probably feel a little out of place wherever you go, but that's perfectly normal. It's okay to question and doubt and fight. In the end, all that matters is that you feel comfortable in your own skin.

You are Korean American. From the food you eat at home to every microaggression you've been told since grade school, you are Korean American. You don't like to speak Korean because it's embarrassing to make mistakes with a language everyone around you can speak so fluently. You don't like going to school because you stick out and feel out of the norm. You don't like your eyes, the tone of your skin, or your American accent when you speak Korean. It feels gross, like an off-tune singer in a choir. But I hope you know that you're singing the right song. You know this melody, these lyrics, this beat—they're all familiar to you. It's just in a different key. A symphony that was raised to learn tradition—living in a world of progression. You were raised Korean—you spoke Korean, you ate

Korean food, and even your first sport was Taekwondo. But you live in America, a boiling pot of hundreds of cultures. You don't fit in with your parents like how a "true" Korean does, and you don't fit in school like how a "real" American might. You are Korean American, and that alone is something to be proud of. Embrace who you are—your flaws, your imperfections, your true identity.

A perfect example of how you feel can be described through your native tongue. Korean is something you've always felt uncomfortable using. You're decently capable of speaking and navigating your way through a conversation. But when it comes to reading and writing, it's almost like deciphering hieroglyphics rather than actually reading. It's hard, it's rough, you get made fun of, and it makes you believe you're not "Korean enough". But the truth is, you aren't just Korean, you're Korean American. Struggling with the Korean language as a Korean American isn't just about grammar rules or vocabulary. It's about identity. There's a quiet pressure that comes from being expected to know a language because of your bloodline, even if your environment didn't nurture that fluency. You exist between Korean and American, and your language is proof of that.

I know I'm speaking a lot about cultural identity, but this letter is appropriate for anything else you could think of. It's gonna suck; you're going to feel terrible, but the most you can do is understand yourself and let time pass. Know who you are and never be afraid to express it. Whether it be religious, sexual, personal, or anything else: carry your title with pride. And just know that wherever you go, there will always be a community for you. People with the same accent in their Korean, people with the same childhood experiences, people with the same interests, people like you.

Sincerely,  
You

## To Be Queer in Korean America By Bobin Shim

When I was in sixth grade, I devised the most naïvely idiotic plan ever, all while convincing myself it was complete and utter genius. I even bragged about it to all of my friends, declaring in a now-deleted group chat that it would be foolproof and the smartest thing I'd ever come up with. All I had to do was go to sleep and trust in my acting skills.

Here was the plan: I'd get up the following morning as my unsuspecting mom woke me up for school as usual.

The catch? I had to pretend I was tired. That, to me, was the deciding factor in whether or not my scheme would work.

Then, after I would grumble and ask for my typical five more minutes, I would drop the bomb on her in my most convincingly groggy voice, carefully wording it as if it was a simple passing thought instead of something that's been plaguing my mind for months. And if she did yell at me or love me less or even contemplate kicking me out of the house for it, all I would do was wait for her to bring it up later in the day when I'm more awake and tell her I don't remember telling her a thing. Ha! Like I said, foolproof. All possible grounds covered, right?

What really happened, though, was something I never accounted for. She didn't shake her head in disapproval like I feared or shake her head and tell me it didn't matter to her like I hoped. She just... shook her head at me.

"Not in my household," she told me, but not at all in the tone I was expecting. Instead of the furious voice I was nervously waiting to hear, she responded to me as if I had just asked her if we could have ramen for dinner or if I could sleep in until the next Monday, as if what I told her was a question and the answer was an obvious no.

I waited and waited for her to bring it up again so I could officially close off my master plan. When she did, I thought, I would pretend to be confused. "I never said that," I would say, maybe paired with a strained laugh and an incredulous look to really sell the act. "I'm not like that, anyway. If I did say that, which I definitely didn't, I was probably just tired or something."

But she never did.

The next time queerness was mentioned in my family—besides my mom making jokes to my grandparents about me "thinking I was gay"—was in a way I would have never expected. *Squid Game*, the 2021 Korean film masterpiece, was coming out with a new season featuring a transgender character.

Initially, I was afraid for her. I was so afraid that maybe Director Hwang Dong-hyuk would suddenly drop the ball and sculpt her into a complete caricature, in turn nullifying everything the series stood for and feeding the smoldering flames of queerphobia in Korean society. But as I watched Season 2 with low expectations and fear for the show's integrity, it immediately became clear to me that Cho Hyun-ju, the show's transgender character played by Park Sung-hoon, was the furthest thing from a caricature. She was courageous, compassionate, and made for realistic queer representation; most importantly, just like every other character, she was fundamentally and irrevocably human. What made her all the more human was that even amidst all of the

gore, death, and loss, she found a home in other people. In her case, it was a home that was unlikely to be found anywhere else.

The first thing I remember seeing of Hyun-ju was when all 456 new players were lining up to take photos. As she adjusted her hair and looked into the camera with an apprehensive look, the screen cut to two other characters—an older mother and a man who seemed to be her son—staring at her. I recognized the faces they were making instantly: a very particular mix of confusion with an undertone of disgust, tinged with a light amount of fear. I saw those types of expressions all the time—in the streets, on the internet, and in my own home—in response to anything that wasn't commonly understood by society. Queerness was certainly no exception.

It pained me to watch another queer person—especially one who was Korean like me—get gawked at like a zoo animal instead of the human she was. All of that pain and past experience I carried manifested in a small grudge against the mother and her son. I assumed that, just as certain characters in *Squid Game* were microcosms of different types of people in Korea, the two of them would also be microcosms of Korean society. But despite my confidence in understanding the complexity of human nature, I forgot one of the foundational aspects of humanity: people change. And as the story progressed, they did too.

Over time, the mother and son—named Geum-ja and Yong-sik, respectively—realized through their shared experiences that Hyun-ju had more to her character than a one-dimensional stereotype. Just like them, she had dreams, talents, and an unwavering will to survive the games and take her found family with her. She was a woman, through and through, as fundamental and irrevocable as her humanity—even if the society that she was caged in tried to suppress her for it.

Unexpectedly, after four years of mutual silence, my mom was the one to break it. "There's a transgender character in *Squid Game*," she told me. I just nodded.

Part of me itched to talk to her about it again, but I shrugged it off for the time being. My main reason was fear: becoming comfortable with being queer was a process that's taken years, with no end in sight. My relationship with my mom and my personal sense of identity were things I wasn't ready to put at risk.

Yet somehow, even if I didn't hear crystal-clear words of acceptance from her mouth, I knew that what she said was in part a sign of change; maybe even a vague admission of acceptance. That alone made the turbulence in my heart begin to subside. In the part of me that was once riddled with constant doubts and an unwavering feeling of uncertainty, dark clouds finally started to show small cracks of light, and the pouring rain that had once drowned my thoughts lightened to a weightless drizzle.

In the corner of my eye, I sometimes see bursts of kaleidoscopic color amidst the mass of blue draping our horizon. I know that one day, those small specks of prismatic hue will stretch across the world, welcoming itself as one with the rest of the sky.



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship at the Manhattan District Attorney's office [July 24, 2025]; (Photo by Richard In, Esq., KACE).

# OUR STORIES



*New York Community Town Hall with Rep. Tom Suozzi and Rep. Grace Meng (top) [July 31, 2025] and New Jersey Community Town Hall with NJS Senator Gordon Johnson, Assemblymember Ellen Park, and Assemblymember Shama Haider (bottom) [September 30, 2025] (Photos by KCMB-TV).*

## Discovering Myself Through Korean

By Andrew Lee

“You speak Korean like you’re trying to get deported,” my sister tells me. Every time my sister would try to make fun of my Korean, I always believed she was spouting some 헛소리 (nonsense), but when I was recently at the Incheon Airport and tried to buy a bottle of water by myself, the cashier looked at me like a deer in the headlights. I then realized that my sister’s “헛소리” wasn’t nonsensical at all.

My experience with my Korean heritage was never something that held me back or something I was ashamed of. It gave me a sense of pride, knowing I carried the same blood of the genius creators who brought the world of Squid Game, Shin Ramyeon, and K-POP. Yet, stepping foot in Seoul and trying to navigate daily life, I probably looked like I’d crawled out of a cave the way I was just nodding along, pretending to understand everything around me and hoping no one would ask me to explain anything. My entire life, I never thought my Korean was bad. I could speak to my grandparents and speak well enough to comfortably converse at home. I could even sing all of “Gangnam Style” by Psy blindfolded. I still think my Korean is half-decent as I’m writing this story right now, but I guess being able to sing Gangnam Style doesn’t exactly qualify you to order water without causing a minor international incident.

Despite my pride in my culture, I would be lying to say there weren’t times when I was

embarrassed in my ability to speak Korean. There have been times when I flat-out pretended to be a foreigner in Korean restaurants or stores because I was embarrassed—embarrassed that my words would sound weird, and embarrassed that I would accidentally come across as rude. But more than anything, I was embarrassed by the idea that people would find me too American upon hearing me think and speak. I didn’t fully belong.

My Korean American identity has always been a thin, fragile line separating two stark personas that I had to carefully tread. In Korea, I was too loud. But in America, I was too quiet. It was like two dogs pulling on either side of a rope, with the rope being me. But moments where my friends would appreciate my Korean culture would teach me that I am not divided by two separate personas, but that I am a blend of two wonderful cultures.

I consider language to be a bridge to our cultural heritage. Sometimes that bridge feels shaky, and you might stumble or feel lost. But every step, every awkward nod, every effort to communicate helps make that bridge stronger. I have treaded upon this bridge and still struggle. But despite my shortcomings with the Korean language, I still find ways to immerse myself in the culture more. Whether it be blasting K-pop on my walk home, watching K-dramas, reading manhwas, or listening to my grandparents speak and trying to catch their words, I keep walking that bridge one step at a time.

## Not As Fluent As I Should Be

By Luce Kim

“How are you not able to speak in Korean if you are Korean?”

It’s ironic that a Korean American can speak only a little bit of Korean. However, this has been a part of my Asian experience. Sometimes I don’t think about that fact and go on with the rest of my day, and other times I feel dysphoric with who I am, with my ethnicity, and with my relationship with my Korean family and friends. Whenever the sense of obligation to be fluent in Korean bubbles over my thoughts, I can’t help but feel that the alienation from language further isolates me from my Korean family and friends, who are all fluent in Korean. It’s unfortunate, but it’s still part of who I am as a Korean American.

As a child, my parents were never strict with my Korean education, so I never thought about speaking to them in Korean, even though they would speak to me in Korean most of the time. As I felt more comfortable speaking in English, I continued to speak in English with my parents. This would come back to bite me when I couldn’t interact with my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins in Korea during a summer vacation.

“Did you have a good night’s rest? Do you want anything for breakfast? Has school been tough for you?”

Nods, head shakes, and yes and no responses were the only answers that I could give in Korean. I loved meeting my family, and my experience in Korea was amazing, but there was a palpable sense of separation from them. This weird rift I felt in my trip to Korea sparked my motivation to bridge this gap and learn Korean. And so at some point in the second half of elementary school, I had come to the decision that I wanted to go to a Korean school for the first time in my life. With support from my parents, I slowly improved my Korean at a nearby Korean school for about three years.

Then the world was hit by COVID-19, and so was my Korean.

If I said that my Korean got better or stayed the same during quarantine, I would be lying. The program I attended closed due to the pandemic, and without many opportunities—at least good, quality ones—to learn Korean, I stopped my progress in that language. It wasn’t until quarantine had lifted that I started attending a different Korean

program. But by then, I had lost the one thing that started my progress in Korean: my motivation to learn. As if my lack of motivation wasn’t enough, focusing on school and academics further demotivated me, so I stopped learning Korean.

After I stopped taking Korean lessons, my life went by as usual, except for the learning Korean part. I hung out with old and new friends, focused on my studies, and adjusted most of my life to how it used to be prior to the pandemic. But even with my newest achievements and memories made with people I loved, the feeling of alienation from Korean speakers emerged whenever I heard Korean. It still felt embarrassing whenever I spoke with my Korean peers, knowing I lacked the fluency and understanding of a language that I also had connections to.

A couple of months ago, my family and I were invited to a K-BBQ restaurant to meet my dad’s friend. I noticed that he didn’t know how to speak Korean at all except for the very basics. Despite this, he was very relaxed and comfortable in being a limited Korean speaker. Whenever one of the people at the table asked him something in Korean, he had no hesitation in telling them that he didn’t understand what they were saying.

Meeting him was enough to reassure me that not knowing enough Korean cannot pose a barrier between my family and friends, and that it was not something to feel guilty for. And despite the lack of this shared language, not once did the ambience feel awkward; everyone was enjoying each other’s company while still being immersed in our food and stories we told. Knowing that there are others like me—Korean Americans who aren’t fluent in Korean—made me feel better about my identity, which I had believed to be an oddity for quite some time.

Throughout my life, even though I wasn’t the most fluent in Korean, I was involved with my Korean holidays like Chuseok and had immersed myself in Korean culture, like the food, the music, the stories, and other parts of my heritage. There are other parts of my Korean identity that make me Korean American; not knowing a lot of Korean isn’t the only factor that contributes to who I am. That is to say, this doesn’t mean that I will never learn Korean—maybe I might try again sooner or later—but my lack of proficiency in Korean never made me less of a Korean.



*The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship conducting a voter registration drive at the H-Mart in Queens, NY [July 25, 2025]; (Photo by Richard In, Esq., KACE).*

# INTERVIEWS

## Interview by Lydia Lee

*This is an interview with a Korean immigrant man (name redacted for privacy) about his experience immigrating to America.*

### Q: Why did you immigrate to the United States from South Korea?

A: Back then, it was hard to make a living in Korea. Jobs were limited, and the future felt uncertain. I had a family to support and needed to find a more stable path. My older brother was already in America and told me there were job opportunities here. That gave me hope. I decided to come not just for myself, but for my family. I believed moving to the U.S. would open up more possibilities for us, and I wanted to give my children a better life than I had.

### Q: What did you expect from America, and did it live up to your standards?

A: I thought life in America would be easier—I expected that once I got here, I'd quickly find success and live comfortably. But it wasn't as simple as I imagined. It was hard adjusting at first. The language, the culture, even the work—it was all different. Still, over time, I was able to find stability. I don't regret coming. I raised my kids well here, and now I have five wonderful granddaughters. Seeing them grow up here makes me feel proud and thankful for the life we built.

### Q: How was the immigration process?

A: I was fortunate. Since I came as a trained chef, I was able to immigrate as a skilled worker, so the process wasn't as difficult for me as it was for others. I found work fairly quickly, especially in Korean-owned restaurants. Later, when I applied for citizenship, I qualified to take the test in Korean because I had been in the U.S. for over fifteen years and was over 55 years old. That helped a lot since I wasn't fluent in English. Compared to other immigrant stories I've heard, mine was a bit smoother.

### Q: What are some key differences that you observe between the culture in South Korea and the United States?

A: The biggest difference I noticed was in how people treat elders. In Korea, there's a deep respect for older generations—we speak politely, we bow, we follow certain customs. But in America, I was shocked to see how casual people were. Young people would talk informally to older adults or even smoke in front of them, which would be considered very rude in Korea. Also, Americans are more individualistic. In Korea, family and community come first, but here, people focus more on personal freedom and independence.

### Q: What was the hardest part of immigration?

A: I didn't have one big struggle like some people do, but it was still hard emotionally. Leaving everything behind—my home, my extended family, my language—it was a big sacrifice. I also had to carry the responsibility of making sure my family could survive and succeed here. That pressure stayed with me for a long time. But I tried to stay focused on why I came—to give my kids a better life.

### Q: After knowing your experience in America, if you could choose, would you immigrate to America again?

A: If I think about everything I have today—my children, my granddaughters, and the life we built here—then yes, I would do it again. It was hard, but it was worth it for my family. But if I didn't have children or family, I probably wouldn't have come. Life would have been hard in Korea, but being alone in a new country would've been even harder. I didn't come here for myself—I came because I wanted a better future for my kids. And I believe that goal was fulfilled.



*The 2025 KACE Grassroots Interns at the Supreme Court of the United States (top) [July 16, 2025]; (Photo by Richard In, Esq., KACE [top] and Hanah Kang [bottom]).*

## Interview by Olivia Lee (NJ)

*This is an interview with a Korean immigrant man (name redacted for privacy) about their experience immigrating to America.*

### Q: How was your experience of moving to the U.S. during your junior year of high school?

A: I came to the States with big expectations and hope for a new beginning. My first month in the U.S. was full of surprises and excitement. Since I came during the summer, my cousin had taken me to do activities that traditionally held negative connotations in Korea, such as playing pool, bowling, and hanging out late at night. I never faced many challenges adjusting to American high school life since I had a full support system from my ESL teachers and Korean-speaking peers. One thing I had to adjust to was attending school with peers who were three years younger than me. This meant that I would have to graduate high school at the age of 20 and couldn't play any sports my senior year since I didn't make the age cut. Still, I made sure to enjoy the variety of sports gym classes provided to me. In Korea, we had to attend physical education classes outdoors where the air was dusty; however, in America, there were more opportunities for me to play a variety of sports indoors. America definitely provided me with the opportunities to live a more comfortable life.

### Q: What was one memory you have where you felt that you belonged in America, even as an immigrant?

A: I remember playing frisbee very often with my friends. I would play with German kids, Chinese kids, Hispanic kids, African kids, and even Polish kids. Although I wasn't the most skilled at throwing the frisbee, I was great at catching it. It gave me a sense of accomplishment every time I would make a goal because it meant that my teammates were proud to play with me; this was the first time I felt unity in this foreign country. This was also my first exposure to diversity in the U.S. It taught me that even if there was a communication

barrier, everyone had to come together to play frisbee. It didn't matter in this field whether we looked different from each other because in the end, we all collectively had one goal: to have fun playing a sport we enjoyed.

### Q: Can you describe the culture shocks you experienced as a 1.5-generation immigrant?

A: When I immigrated, the most shocking spectacle for me was the people; everyone had different stories and customs. When I met fellow Koreans in America, I understood their ways of life, but when it came to other people who came from different backgrounds, I often found myself questioning their culture. That's when I realized that living in America gave me the choice to think freely and express creativity; there was never one single solution to a problem—there were multiple. Although there were some differences between Korea and America, I don't think I experienced too much cultural shock. I always lived life feeling like a chameleon, adapting to my environment and accepting things the way they were.

### Q: If you could go back in time, what is one thing you believe would have helped you achieve a better future as a Korean American immigrant?

A: I would have wanted to take my education more seriously and study harder to work towards a better future. I also wish I had spoken up to my parents about letting me apply to a better university. The biggest challenge I faced in college was not my skill or ability to get in, but my financial situation. My family was unaware of the financial aid we could have been granted if we had applied for it. I would have been able to study in a better environment with more competitive people and had a chance at better opportunities. Even though I blame my parents from time to time, you never know. I might not have studied as hard as I claim I would have if I attended a better school. Who knows if I would have dropped out? I feel that if I were to go back in time, the same exact scenario could have occurred.



*2025 KACE Grassroots Interns performing the annual trial reenactment at Helen Marshall Cultural Center. Special thanks to AABANY and JuryGroup for the script and materials, to the Queens Borough President's office for use of the Helen Marshall Cultural Center, and KCMB-TV for the audio and media! [August 13, 2025]; (Photo by KCMB-TV).*

# INTERVIEWS



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Interns at the Inaugural Cho-Shim Conference, a national conference of Korean American youth [September 27, 2025]; (Photo by Richard In, Esq., KACE).

## Interview by Yejin Nah

This is an interview with a college graduate (name redacted for privacy) about their experience immigrating to America.

**Q. How old were you and when did you immigrate to the United States?**

A. I was 12 years old, and it was during the summer of 2014 when I immigrated.

**Q. What was the major thing you noticed was different from Korea when you first arrived in the U.S.?**

A. Probably the diversity of the people. Korea's ethnically very homogeneous, whereas the U.S. is more diverse. You get to meet a lot of people from very different backgrounds.

**Q. After knowing your experience in both Korea and the U.S., if you had the choice, which one would you live in?**

A. I've been thinking a lot about this lately, and I'm still not sure. I have all my high school and college friends in the U.S., but I love my home country and still have some family members in Korea. Both places feel like my home. Considering the current political environment and my current sentiment, I still want to finish my education in the U.S., but I think I'll eventually move back to Korea.

**Q. How have you been, if you have, holding onto your Korean heritage and identity?**

A. Holding onto my Korean heritage and identity hasn't been a big problem for me. I speak Korean at home, cook Korean dishes,

watch Korean baseball, listen to Korean music, watch Korean films, and hang out with my Korean American friends. So far, I've been lucky enough to live in places with relatively easy access to Korean communities.

**Q. Have you ever experienced discrimination in any form?**

A. Personally, I haven't really experienced any obvious forms of discrimination, maybe just some changes in mannerisms in some people I've met, but I didn't pay much attention to remember whatever they might have said or done to discriminate against me. I've been mistakenly identified as Japanese or Chinese a few times, but it's understandable considering we ourselves get confused all the time.

**Q. Compared to the beginning when you came to America, how has the way people in the U.S. treated you changed over the course of the 11 years you've lived here?**

A. When I first came over to the U.S., I was identified as just an "Asian" who came from another small Asian country. But nowadays I'm identified as Korean, from a country that's home to K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean food. I think it's largely due to the fact that the way the people in the US perceive Koreans and the Korean culture has changed dramatically over the last decade. Eleven years ago, only a few people I've met knew where Korea was. Nowadays, pretty much everyone I meet knows how to say 안녕하세요. So I benefited a lot from the general American public learning more about Korea and its culture over the years.

## Interview by Chloe Chung

This is an interview with an 18-year-old Korean Immigrant (name redacted for privacy) about his experience immigrating to America.

**Q: What was your first impression of America?**

A: My dad and I were to settle in the United States before the rest of my family, to ensure no delay in immigrating. I was surrounded by a sense of thrill as we landed. Starting with Toys 'R Us, I always found myself leaving footprints in every place that sold toys and food. I was sad to leave my friends behind, but before I got a chance to grieve, joy overcame me as I walked around my new home. Unlike the country-like environment back in Korea, my new place felt different. In Korea, I used to live in a rural area. So when I saw so many buildings and houses next to each other, I felt a stir of emotions.

**Q: When things were hard, where did you go to find comfort?**

A: The church has been a big part of my identity. It has been a cornerstone of my life, providing not just a spiritual foundation but also a sense of community, belonging, and moral guidance. Church was the first place I visited after moving here, and I was able to meet so many valuable people that I wouldn't have met across the world. There are times when I could not bear problems on my own, so I reached out to members for emotional support and prayers. Only after a few months did I feel a sense of acceptance, regardless of who I was in the past.

**Q: Have you ever had a time when you felt a change in your perspective on your immigrant identity?**

A: I would always try to hide my past because of my fear of standing out. But there was this comment that struck me: "I wonder what it's like to live in Korea. I wanna be from there too!" Upon hearing these words, I felt a sense of

pride for the first time. Once I shared my experiences, we got along seamlessly. They no longer saw me as an outsider but as a friend. Until that moment, I was frustrated with how I was always behind, different, and awkward. But I no longer felt ashamed of being different and appreciated how I lived a different life.

**Q: If you had a chance to go back, what would you have changed?**

A: Honestly, I wouldn't have changed anything even if I were to go back. The decision to move to the United States marked the start of a new chapter, one where I could continue to build my unique puzzle. Each transition from one country to another wasn't about abandoning the past or creating an entirely new puzzle—it was about completing my puzzle, shaped by moments from around the world... But if I had to change one thing, I would want to change how I viewed myself. I always thought I had to impress people and show them I'm not different.

**Q: What were some major struggles and problems you had after immigrating?**

A: After coming to America, I struggled to keep up academically, facing a language barrier that put me behind my peers. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't catch up to those who were born in America. I always questioned my parents why I wasn't born here, why I looked different, ate different food, and had to live differently from others. As time passed, I lost confidence in opening up. Even after moving back to Korea, the struggle continued. Though I was surrounded by people of my race, I was still viewed as an outsider due to my time in America. I moved around from Korea to Canada, back to Korea, and to America. Everywhere I went, I was an outcast, the odd one out. For years, I continued spending my time trying to fit in by erasing my past identity.



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Interns at KACE's first GwangBokJeol Ceremony and Celebration [August 15, 2025]; (Photos by KCMB-TV).

# FIELD RESEARCH

## Barton Avenue Open Streets, Open Mic

By Ethan Bai, Chloe Chung, and Joshua Kim

On July 27, 2025, the Open Street Open Mic event took place at Barton Avenue in Queens. The purpose of this event was to create an inviting space where the neighborhood can come together and perform to their heart's content through culture and art. Some primary goals that they sought to achieve consisted of encouraging a broader community, strengthening local partnerships and community unity, supporting the local economy and small businesses, amplifying immigrant, youth, and underrepresented voices, reimagining public space as creative spaces, and promoting the role of community media. By hosting this event, KCMB-TV, KACE's longtime community partnering organization, offered an accessible platform for anyone to sing and dance. Partnering up with local businesses, there were raffles and prizes for the performers, encouraging many to come out to the stage.

KACE Intern Bobin Shim performed "Walking Back Home" by Vira Talisa on the guitar, and a group of interns, Chloe Chung, Sonia Huang, Luce Kim, and Yejin Nah, danced to "Tell Me" by Wonder Girls. Some of the performances had people dance along with the song, giving people opportunities to connect with the community. In the end, everyone who performed received an award, which included a \$50 coupon for Korean barbecue and other restaurant coupons. After the awards, there was a raffle held for prizes like rice and folding fans. One of the KACE interns, Joshua Kim, won a folding fan from the raffle.

As volunteers at the event, we clearly saw the success of the goals they were trying to achieve. We enjoyed how this event brought many people together; the event fostered the creation of new connections and engagements within the community. Furthermore, it helped build more bonds with one another, clearly shown through how everyone present at the

event was in a joyous mood. In conclusion, Open Street Open Mic was more than just a public stage for performance; it was a living, breathing space where neighbors were connected through creativity. This event allowed the community to express themselves through their talents while also celebrating the diverse voices of Flushing. KCMB-TV brought the vision of providing "a Stage for Everyone" and "a Community for All" to life.

### Chloe Chung's perspective:

This event gave us an opportunity to not only help behind the scenes but also be performers ourselves. I performed a dance, with only two days of practice, with the other interns. I felt nervous going on stage, but with how welcoming and supportive the audience was, I no longer felt the nervousness to get all the moves correct and began enjoying the moment, dancing with the rest of the performers. As we danced, the people watching were smiling, clapping along, and cheering. They seemed to genuinely enjoy our performance, which brought me to appreciate the experience even more. I hope there are more community events like this, so that many more can also experience the joy and confidence I felt from sharing my performance with the community.

### Ethan Bai's perspective:

I took a more background role, helping out with equipment and cleaning up. Watching all the different performances was exciting. Seeing this one band on the stage especially surprised me, as the electric guitarist was my guitar instructor. Beyond the stage, the nearby cafe also served as a significant gathering place during the event. Many KACE interns hung out at the cafe while waiting for performances. I even met a fellow church member who treated me to a nice drink! After the event, we feasted on pizza at a nearby restaurant Urim Lee, a fellow KACE intern, bought for us. Overall, volunteering at the Barton Avenue Open Street Open Mic event was an amazing experience; I would gladly do it again.



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship at K-FAN 2025 [June 30, 2025]; (Photo by Richard In, Esq., KACE).

## K-FAN 2025 (K-Pop Festival & Next Generation)

By Sonija Huang

When Mr. In informed the interns about K-FAN 2025: K-FAN (K-Pop Festival & Next Generation), I knew that I had to attend. As someone who has been a K-Pop fan for years but has never been able to attend a concert, I figured that this was the perfect opportunity to finally see an event like this beyond a screen; so, I sent a quick email and soon, I was standing at a bus station with my fellow intern, heading towards an event venue over an hour away to watch teams of teenage dancers compete for a chance in the K-Pop industry and a few awards. From the start, I knew that my experience at K-FAN 2025 was going to be wonderful. Not long after we entered the auditorium where the dancers would be performing, we met up with Mr. In, who offered us seats in the center of the room with a great view of the stage. Then, the lights dimmed and the three MCs stepped out, signaling the beginning of the actual event.

I wasn't sure what the special stages would be like at all, but the song they chose, "Last Festival" by TWS, was, in my opinion, the perfect song to start with. I remembered streaming this song when it first came out and thinking, "Wow, TWS released another banger." As a result, I was absolutely hyped throughout their entire performance, and all my nervousness had disappeared almost immediately. After the opening stage, the real competition had started- the MCs introduced the first team, Kreate Dance, and they came out to perform. While they were performing, though, I was looking for one girl specifically. I didn't recall her name, but before all the performances had begun, I remembered that the lady in front of us said that her daughter

would be performing on that team and that she was "very energetic," and as soon as the performance began I understood why. Out of all four girls, there was one that stood out the most with her exaggerated moves and facial expressions; I ended up watching her almost the entire performance, marveling at her skill and confidence. In the end, I mentally listed this performance as one of my favorites.

Ironically enough, my absolute favorite performance was, unlike the Whiplash stage, at the very end of the competition. The last performance of the competing teams was "IZNA" by Izna, performed by the team AKFAMILY. When the performance started, I was absolutely hooked. Although the other stages were amazing and I thoroughly enjoyed every second of them, nothing could compare to the nostalgia that hit me as I heard the song; it took me back to mid-April of 2024 when I watched the first episode of my very first K-Pop survival show, I-Land 2: N/a, to when I voted tirelessly for my favorite trainees, and to when I saw the airing of the final debut lineup of the new girl group, Izna. Now, watching teenagers just like them dance to their song on stage, I felt immensely proud of how hard the girls had worked to get to where they are now. Then, when I saw AKFAMILY go up to take their award, I felt proud once again.

My experience at K-FAN 2025 was, to say the least, amazing. I felt that nothing disappointed me at all about this event- the performances were incredible, the energy and audience were top notch, and even the random play dance was full of my favorite songs that made it awesome to watch. Overall, I'm incredibly grateful to Mrs. Esther G. Lee, and all others that made it possible for me to attend this event, and I will be looking out for more events like this in the future.



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship at the Barton Avenue Open Street Open Mic event [July 27, 2025]; (Photo by KCMB-TV).

# FIELD RESEARCH



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship in Washington, D.C. [July 16, 2025]; (Photo by Dong Chan Kim, KACE).

## Our Trip to Washington D.C., My Experience By Lucas Ahn

Coming to D.C, I knew it was important to not just be a simple observer or a mere bystander, but to take an active part in the proceedings. For Korean Americans, for students, and for concerned citizens, our stories are too often overlooked in these hallowed halls of power. This trip not only offered a unique look behind the curtain of intrigue, but the meetings we had that day also helped demonstrate the humanity of the people behind our country and showed them in a new light beyond being a simple authority figure.

The first meeting where I felt a real connection was with a staffer from Senator Cory Booker's office, particularly due to her discussion of her work for the senator. For example, she described the week-long preparation for the Senator's filibuster and the "health, education, and veterans binders" she helped assemble. Through this, I saw the grit that goes into moments that later trend on Twitter or make the evening news.

Additionally, her journey of how she had come to this office spoke to me as well. Health was the first issue that pulled her into politics, specifically reproductive health, which was one of the driving forces behind her activism and the eventual career in public service. Her strong stance on certain issues showed a

certain depth of character that spoke to me.

Next, we met with a staffer for Senator Kirsten Gillibrand: Anna Song, who works on judiciary, housing, and women's issues. Since I'm not a New Yorker, I wasn't the most informed about Senator Gillibrand coming in, so this was my first introduction to her and her staff. However, despite my relative lack of knowledge about the senator, I found the presentation fascinating. The fact that her road to politics was so unconventional, with her wanting to be a wedding planner, as well as the fact that she had such an interesting journey made her story very compelling to me. Additionally, her ironclad focus on childcare and paid family leave was also incredibly moving. Hearing from people like Anna and the staffer for Senator Booker was an eye opening experience because it humanized these people to me.

Furthermore, through Anna's explanation of the uphill battle of fighting forced arbitration and securing funding for housing and reproductive care, her words reminded me that while the headlines often highlight conflict and spectacle, there are still people behind every action, working to make a better future.

At the end of the day, sitting down with Senator Andy Kim quickly became one of the most meaningful conversations of the trip. He didn't speak in polished soundbites or pre-written monologues, but was honest and

talked to us directly. One of the most moving parts of the discussion was his journey into politics. He shared how after 9/11, he felt called to serve and eventually found his way to the State Department. But even there, he faced incredible discrimination, being banned from working on issues related to the Korean Peninsula because of his heritage which I found deeply moving. His struggles with racism and discrimination in this country really struck a chord with me and solidified his sincerity in my mind.

As mentioned by Senator Kim himself, we know, as Korean Americans, what it's like to be seen as perpetual foreigners, never quite belonging. He said people used to call him "the wrong minority," but he refused to shrink into a stereotype. Furthermore, his insistence that Asian Americans aren't a special interest group was really interesting to me. Normally, I'd feel that people would celebrate the minority status of Asian Americans, and yet instead he was arguing against it. He explained that this was because he felt that we deserved a seat at the table for every issue, not just the ones the world associates with being "Asian." I hadn't really considered this before, and it was enlightening.

Furthermore, when he also spoke out against efforts to ban Chinese people from buying property in the U.S, I was further impressed. I wasn't just learning about the

behind the scenes of the government, but also issues that I didn't even know of before. I found myself agreeing with many of his positions. Senator Kim explained that he believes in civic engagement, in rejecting machine politics, and in focusing on people over power. Specifically he said that, "People are tired of politics but that's exactly why we need to show them that it can be better." This comment resonated with me the most.

Throughout the day, a few themes echoed over and over again: the rising cost of higher education, the need for accessible childcare, the push for reproductive rights, and the urgency of representation. But more than all these actual issues, what struck me the most was the humanity of the people we met. By meeting these people, by putting a face onto them, and being able to humanize them, I found myself relating and empathizing with them far more than I had before.

Overall, the trip humanized the people behind the policies as well as gave greater clarity upon the political process. While I knew the trip would be rewarding, I was surprised with how much I took away from it. With the trip, not only did I feel a greater sense of hope for the future and the political process, but it also inspired me to become a more active participant in the political process. Because like Senator Kim said, we're not just guests in this democracy. We belong here.

# FIELD RESEARCH



Group Photo with Senator Andy Kim (U.S. Senate - NJ) [July 16, 2025]; (Photo by Jiwon Kim, KACE).



Group Photo at Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer's office (U.S. Senate - NY) [July 16, 2025]; (Photo by Richard In, Esq., KACE).



Group Photo with Senator Cory Booker's office (U.S. Senate - NJ) [July 16, 2024]; (Photo by Richard In, Esq., KACE).

# FIELD RESEARCH



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship field outing in Manhattan [July 10, 2025]; (Photos by Richard In, Esq., KACE).



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship at the New York Hall of Science [July 18, 2025]; (Photos by Richard In, Esq., KACE).



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship visit to the Korean Cultural Center of New York [August 14, 2025]; (Photos by Richard In, Esq., KACE).



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art [September 9, 2025]; (Photos by Richard In, Esq., KACE).



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship at the Korean Parade and Festival in New York [October 4, 2025]; (Photos by Youngsoo Choi, Esq., KACE).



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship at the Annual KAFSC Silent March in Downtown Flushing, NY [October 10, 2025]; (Photos by KCMB-TV).

# OPINIONS

## The Problematic Representation of Asian Americans in Media

By Lucas Ahn

The lack of representation of people of color, and especially Asian Americans, in Hollywood has often been a topic of discussion, and despite the progress made, there is still work that needs to be done. Growing up, I rarely saw anyone who looked like me on screen, and whenever I did, they were often caricatures or stereotypes. Asian Americans were often portrayed as weak, nerdy, powerless, exotic, and rarely given the spotlight in leading roles. While representation has certainly improved since I was a kid, representation today is by no means perfect, and more progress is still necessary for true, good representation to be shown on screen.

Despite modern representation improving, Hollywood has had a long history of portraying Asians in demeaning and stereotypical ways. From classic films like *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to even more modern pieces of media like *Romeo Must Die*, countless films have depicted the Asian American community in offensive ways. In *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, despite being considered an all-time classic, it contains arguably the most infamous portrayal of yellowface in all of Hollywood history with the character of I. Y. Yunioshi, played by a white actor Mickey Rooney. The caricature was so offensive that even in 1961, when the film was released, it was controversial. Yellowface and stereotypical portrayals of Asian Americans have constantly plagued our community for as long as we've been portrayed in cinema. While yellowface has become a far less prevalent problem today, stereotypes, especially the emasculation and fetishization of Asian Americans, have continued into the modern age. This can be seen in films like *Romeo Must Die*. In the film, despite being an adaptation of Shakespeare's famous tragedy,

due to being an Asian man, the Romeo of this film wasn't allowed to have romantic interactions on camera. While these flawed representations of Asian Americans in media have mostly been left in the past, the progress that has been made is not sufficient, especially with the continued prevalence of the "model minority" stereotype from *Gilmore Girls* to *The Big Bang Theory*.

The label of the model minority is so damaging to the Asian American community because of how pervasive the dangers of it are. While there are seemingly positive implications to the stereotype, in actuality, the model minority stereotype keeps Asian Americans, not only keeps Asians in an inherently subservient position, but also at odds with other people of color. The model minority myth rewards people who don't question the system, but never so much so that they can threaten those in real power. This is made especially evident in how the model minority trope is shown in the media. Asian characters are often depicted as side characters, and despite whatever success they may have, they are almost always depicted with only intellectual passions and backgrounds, and are never able to surpass their contemporaries in fields outside the intellectual ones.

Additionally, it also places Asian Americans at odds with other minority groups because it tends to be a reproach on other groups for not having the same success as Asian Americans, while ignoring systemic issues like poverty, racism, and other such problems in the way of minorities. The continued prevalence of the model minority myth is evidence for how, despite representation in modern Hollywood improving with films like *Beef*, *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, the rise of Asian media like K-dramas, and other better pieces of representation, it's by no means a perfect situation.



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship at the New Jersey Chuseok Festival [September 20, 2025]; (Photos by Richard In, Esq. and Eugene Seong, KACE).

## The Effects of K-Dramas on Korean American Youth

By Isaac Cho

In recent decades, Korean dramas (K-Dramas) have exploded in popularity, emphasized by the increase in their availability on platforms such as Netflix, captivating audiences with their emotional depth and many themes. Among the groups that are most deeply influenced by this sudden popularity surge in K-dramas are the Korean American youth, members of the current generation growing up in the United States with a dual cultural identity. For this demographic, K-dramas act as more than just entertainment and serve as a bridge to both their Korean heritage as well as a lens through which they better understand their own identity by gaining knowledge of their own culture through media.

K-dramas often portray different aspects of Korean life, such as the values and customs in Korea. Whether it is the emphasis put on family hierarchy, the significance of traditional holidays, or the social dynamics of Korea, K-dramas provide a window into a culture that is both familiar and foreign to our generation of Korean American youth. For those who have grown up speaking English and engaging primarily with American culture, with minimal exposure to Korean culture aside from their parents, K-dramas offer a perspective into the Korean language and culture. Oftentimes, these shows have even inspired young Korean Americans to practice speaking Korean at home, encouraged them to start engaging in their culture more seriously, or sparked curiosity regarding their own origins and their family's roots.

Furthermore, K-dramas have contributed to a growing sense of ethnic pride among the Korean American youth. In a society where Asian Americans have historically been underrepresented, stereotyped, and outcasted in the media, the international success of Korean entertainment has served as an inspiring source of pride for Korean Americans.

Watching Korean actors in shows that dominate global streaming platforms acts as a celebratory moment of an increased sense of cultural identity that may have once felt out of reach. Young Korean Americans now see

aspects of their heritage embraced by individuals of other backgrounds, giving them the feeling of being accepted. From K-drama soundtracks on Spotify playlists to Korean phrases casually used in the media through reels, TikToks, and other short-form content, the prevalence of Korean culture empowers and inspires the identity of Korean Americans. This shift fosters confidence in cultural identity even in those who may have felt ashamed or embarrassed of being different while growing up.

Korean dramas often contain themes that resonate with their entire audience, but most strongly resonate with Korean Americans and their experiences. Issues such as parental expectations, academic pressure, and identity struggles are frequently explored themes in K-dramas. For Korean American youth, seeing characters struggle with challenges such as accepting themselves, similar challenges that Korean Americans face, can be incredibly validating. A character torn between personal passion and family duty is a common story seen in K-dramas. This is an experience many Korean Americans relate to, especially when balancing the American side of one's identity focused on self-respect and individual choice, with Korean values centered on respect for parents and family honor.

In addition, the popularity of K-dramas has helped Korean Americans find their own community with others like themselves, both online and in real life. These dramas have provided shared cultural connections on platforms that form bonds among young Korean Americans not only with each other, but also with others around the world. This sense of global community strengthens the idea that Korean culture has a valuable and respected place in the world as a result of a growing sense of identity.

K-dramas have had a powerful impact on the Korean American youth. They serve as a point of cultural connection, a source of ethnic pride, and a tool for finding and building their own community. As Korean dramas continue to hold an influence in global pop culture, their effect on the identity and self-perception of Korean Americans will likely increase in accordance, creating a more confident, connected, and culturally connected generation for the Korean American community.



The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship conducting a voter registration drive at the H-Mart in Ridgefield, NJ [August 16, 2025]; (Photos by Richard In, Esq., KACE).

# Additional Youth / Young Adult Leadership Development Opportunities



## Grassroots Internship Coordinator Program

Typically consisting of former grassroots interns (not a requirement), our Grassroots Internship Coordinators assist with the education, training, and management of high school interns/volunteers. The position is open to undergraduate students or recent college graduates. Candidates for the program are selected after an application and interview process. This program equips our coordinators with skills and experience to confidently lead the next generation of proud and responsible Korean Americans.



## College / Legal Internship

KACE offers internship opportunities for college students, young adults, and current law students. This internship program is very different from the Grassroots Internship Program meant for high school students. College student and young adult interns assist with a variety of our work, while legal interns assist us with legal research and help facilitate our legal clinics.



## The Cho-Shim Conference

The first ever inaugural Cho-Shim Conference was successfully held Saturday, September 27, 2025, in five different States, coast-to-coast across America, with the five inaugural co-host Korean American organizations: KACE (NY/NJ), KRC (CA), FCC GW (VA/Washington D.C.), Family Touch (NJ), and Catalyst Coalition (GA). Over 30 Korean American high school students from across the country participated in total, with representative Youth Ambassadors from each co-hosting organization leading fruitful discussions on a variety of different topics impacting our communities. Thank you to everyone that attended and that helped make this possible. We hope to see everyone again along with many new faces next year!



## College Student-lead Initiatives

We work with college-aged young adults to help them understand how to utilize their vast networks and resources to deliver change and impact to improve their communities.

## Mentorship / Guidance

KACE provides mentorship opportunities and guidance to help high school students, college students, and young adults to excel in academics and career paths. One advice we share with all eager and motivated young persons is to not let your young age or lack of experience deter you from reaching out for guidance and mentorship. Experience is something that is earned over time, and time is the advantage that all young people possess. It goes without saying, of course, that you still need to put in the work. It's okay not to get it exactly right the first time. But with each attempt, you learn and build upon what you've already learned. Sooner or later, you'll find that those lessons add up to earning the experience needed to excel on your career path and passions.

## Support KACE for Community



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The 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship with NYS Assembly Member Edward Braunstein, NYC Councilwoman Sandra Ung, KACE Board members, and community members at our first GwangBokJeol Ceremony at the KACE New York Office. [August 15, 2025]; (Photo by KCMB-TV).

**Korean American Civic Empowerment for Community Inc. extends our warmest gratitude toward this year's Sponsors of the 2025 KACE Grassroots Internship Program.**  
**Thank you!**



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