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On Director Shim's Legacy

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INFUSION STAFF

We can only
say Thank you.

After 41 years of innovation and dedication Fulbright Executive Director Jai Ok Shim retires, leaving behind an unforgettable legacy

By Paige Aniyah Morris & Infusion Staff

When Fulbright Korea alumni reunite, they may reminisce about singing at the noraebang, having rice and kimchi for every meal, and buying triangle kimbap at a pyeonuijeom. Eventually, these conversations circle back to the person who has attained near-mythical status among Fulbright grantees—Jai Ok Shim, the Executive Director of the Korean-American Educational Commission.

Whether at the KAEC office building or during a brief moment of downtime at a Fulbright conference, it is not hard to find and fall into a conversation with Director Shim. Somehow, she seems to understand the particular set of anxieties that Americans living and working in Korea face, her advice and the anecdotes she offers during Orientation becoming eerily pertinent mere weeks into our Korea experience. If it seems she has mastered the art of addressing grantees' concerns before even we are aware of them, this may be due to the fact that she has served the Fulbright Program for more than 40 years now and was once in a position quite similar to that of a newly-arrived grantee in an unfamiliar place far from home.

In the summer of 1967, Director Shim arrived in the United States to begin work as a Korean language and culture instructor for K3 and K5 American Peace Corps volunteers who would be stationed in the then-developing country of South Korea. “Korea was really poor at that time,” Director Shim recalls. She describes the quality of Korean life in the 1960s and 1970s as “miserable,” the country polluted and impoverished in the aftermath of the Korean War. Director Shim looked upon the Peace Corps mission with awe and considered the American volunteers “brave” for preparing to serve in Korea at quite a tumultuous time in its growth.

Her first year in the U.S., Director Shim worked for a training program in Pennsylvania. There, she fell in love with teaching. She remembers lesson planning late into the night, then rising at dawn to pre-write notes on the blackboards in her classroom. She holds fond memories of earnest students echoing her pronunciation of new words, asking for Korean names, and even complaining about the difficulty of learning a language so different from their own.

“They told me, ‘How come your language is so difficult? Why can’t you change it?’” she says. While she empathized with their struggles, she responded with characteristic candor to her students’ pleas for the language and culture to be made more palatable for them. “I said, ‘This is our mother tongue. Don’t ask me to change it.’ I convinced them: accept it as it is and try to learn rather than rejecting it.” To the students who wondered, “Why is your tradition so different?” she replied, “Yes, it is different. But accept it as a different culture. It’s not your [position] to change it.”

Alumni from her first class of Peace Corps trainees have become respected professionals, high-ranking government officials, and renowned scholars who cite her teaching as the fuel sparking their lifelong interests in Korean Studies. At the end of the training program that summer, Director Shim received the highest teaching evaluation scores and was invited to return the following winter, this time to the deserts of Arizona.

While she trained Americans in an unfamiliar grammar, Director Shim also used the opportunity to offer her family back in Korea rare glimpses of a

culture foreign to them, too. Through her letters and postcards, her sons could view the scenery and cityscapes of a country they had never visited. She remembers their eager questions, how excited they were to see ski resorts and other oddities new to them. International education, Shim realized, was not only a chance for her to teach Americans about Korea, but to open a once-shuttered window into the U.S. for Koreans, too. These distinct cultures, she thought, could be bridged and bettered through shared knowledge and mutual exchange.

Director Shim's two years of experience training the Peace Corps volunteers left a deep impression on her and inspired her to continue working in public service, particularly on matters of education. "This," she says of her own time as a language and culture instructor, "is why I came to Fulbright." After working as a Fiscal Officer and later a Program Officer at the Peace Corps Headquarters in Seoul from 1969 to 1977, Shim first joined the Fulbright Commission as an Administrative Officer in 1977. She later served as the Deputy Director from 1990 until she was appointed to the Executive Director position in 2004.

Her transition from the Peace Corps to the Fulbright Program was not exactly a seamless passing of the baton. As the 1980s approached, the Peace Corps began phasing out its program in Korea as the country experienced a boom of economic development that launched Korea out of its developing nation status. During this transition period in the late 1970s, Edward Wright, then-Executive Director of the Fulbright Program in Korea, approached Director Shim about an administrative position with the Commission, which would ultimately become the Korean-American Educational Commission. If Shim accepted, she would go from overseeing an established program with an operating budget of \$5 million to assisting a still-fledgling program whose annual budget was a twentieth of the size. It was an unappealing offer, and Director Shim ruminated on the decision for an entire year, resisting increasing pressure from Wright and even consulting her family before accepting. After all, the work that the Fulbright Commission aimed to do aligned with causes she valued—education and improving international relations. In the end, she says, "I couldn't say no." And, she adds with a laugh, it was a much easier decision

to make when she learned that much of the Peace Corps budget would roll over to Fulbright.

With her strong resolve and unwavering set of guiding principles, Director Shim's tenure with the Fulbright Commission has not been without its difficulties. She has, at times, found herself on the receiving end of criticism from her superiors—often men in high seats of power who resisted the hands-on approach she took to her administration. A common thread running through her long history of leadership has been her faith in the power of collective effort. “What I can be proud of in this office,” she says of the KAEC staff, “is that we don't have any conflict. We do everything together.” As an Administrative Officer in the late 1980s, Shim, along with former Executive Director Frederick Carriere, spearheaded the creation of the Fulbright Korea Alumni Association. This community, she believed, was essential for the spread of knowledge and the growth of a shared identity among the many accomplished individuals who entered and graduated from the Fulbright Korea program. In 1991, early in her tenure as Deputy Director, KAEC formally established the Korea Fulbright Foundation, which, together with the alumni association, raised funds for the purchase of Korea's Fulbright Building in 1999 in a move that made Fulbright Korea the only commission with its own building.

Upon becoming the Executive Director of KAEC in 2004, Shim immediately implemented a change in the Fulbright grant application review process. She had noticed a high number of early grant terminations in previous years, as well as an increase in reports of Fulbright ETAs' poor performances in their placement schools. Director Shim decided to involve herself in the selection of grantees and personally read each application. Her first year as Executive Director, she made a decision not to select the top applicant recommended by the Institute of International Education for a teaching grant to Korea. “I almost lost my job,” she recalls. “IIE was so furious about my decision. They asked the State Department to fire me.”

When pressed for a justification, she stood by her call, maintaining that an applicant's impressive résumé and networks were not necessarily indicative of their commitment to the Fulbright mission and the role of an

educator in Korea. Director Shim told the State Department boldly in her report, “If I’ve done a bad job, we [will] see at the end of the year.” That year, she recalls, the program experienced no early terminations or complaints of poor performance from schools. She says proudly, “I think we have done a great job ... of selecting our ETAs.”

Throughout her history with the Fulbright Program, Director Shim has developed several initiatives for the benefit of Fulbright Korea grantees, establishing the famous six-week orientation and the summer Fulbright English program that provide mentorship, teaching experience, and language learning opportunities to incoming ETAs. In 2014, KAEC launched its Graduate Studies Program for American scholars to pursue degrees in Korean Studies at Yonsei University. In 2017, the Commission introduced a scholarship award and long-term intensive English program for North Korean defectors to pursue graduate studies in the U.S. Director Shim has received recognition from the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board, the Korean American Educational Commission, the U.S. Department of State, and the Public Diplomacy Achievement Award for her leadership, service, and commitment to international education. Under her governance, Fulbright Korea has become internationally known as the flagship program or “gold standard” among Fulbright Programs.

Fulbright Program directors in countries throughout Asia and the world cite Director Shim and Fulbright Korea as an inspiration. “The director of the Fulbright Taiwan Program [is] always copying my program,” she reveals with a good-natured laugh. “He confessed it!” With the announcement of her retirement earlier this year, Director Shim leaves the Fulbright Korea community both bereft and grateful for the legacy she has built—one that has spanned decades and touched several corners of the globe. Her impact can be seen and felt in the lives and careers of the thousands of teachers, researchers, and scholars she has welcomed into the Fulbright Korea community. As Christine Arrozal, Aimee Jachym, and Laura Kennedy say so succinctly in their tribute to Director Shim: “We can only say thank you.”

Following her retirement, Shim anticipates spending more time with her family. At present, she is penning a book about her experiences.

HOME

PHOTOS

NOTES FROM ALUMNI