



My Story: Why I serve the Homeless People?

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I am a U.S. mission product from Korea. I was introduced to Jesus in 1949 at Ewha Girl's High School, a mission school in Seoul Korea which was founded by American Methodist missionaries. I am one of the millions of lives saved by the sacrifice of American soldiers in the Korean War. I cannot take for granted the abundant blessings I have received in this country, and it is my honor to repay the assistance I have received here. I serve as a voice of our homeless friends whom I love and serve. They speak through my voice and I speak from their pain-stricken broken hearts.

In 1935 I was born as the last of three children into a wealthy family in North Korea. I was raised like a little princess: eating special food, wearing beautiful clothes and living in three beautiful homes, but emotionally my childhood was drowned in my mother's tears, grief and anguish as an eye witness to my father's abuse.

Our education was very important to our mom because she came from a highly educated family. My maternal grandfather was a noble scholar and a teacher in North Korea. During this period in Korea, girls were not allowed to attend school. I remember my mother always grieving her lack of education. For this reason alone, she would encourage me to get all my education, stand on my feet and never tolerate abuse from a man.

One night my father came home after a time away with other women and he checked my brothers' report cards. When he wasn't satisfied with their grades, he beat my mother and blamed her for not monitoring their school work. He dragged her by the hair to the kitchen, threatening to burn her in the oven. We all screamed in horror and tried to stop him from burning our mom. It was the cruelest experience of my life. Whenever I recall that incident, I still cry and feel the horror and can hardly breathe.

From that experience I learned that **education was very important**. It could have begun a subconsciously ingrained belief that if I did well in school, neither I nor my mother would be punished. While I had never recognized this unconscious fear, I never missed school, even when I was sick.

When we escaped from the Communist regime in North Korea in 1946, we became refugees and aliens in South Korea and **we were reduced to poverty and homelessness**. When I entered the most prominent private junior and senior girl's high school by passing the difficult entrance exam, I, the refugee child, was the poorest one in the whole school. I had only a pair of school uniforms, wore torn tennis shoes, and walked two miles to school every day. But nothing discouraged me because I had a purpose in life to get a good education and become independent as my mother's credo emphasized. Despite our poverty, hunger, and frequent moving, I studied hard. During the Korean War we moved all over the country to get away from the occupying Communist army. Finally, when we escaped to the furthest south end of the country, we were homeless -- sleeping in the parking lot of a train station for a period of time, after which we stayed in a shag in someone's yard for three years. At 15, I worked hard to help my mother make ends meet.

Despite such harsh living conditions, I returned to my school, now in exile and living in tents. I studied hard using a wooden apple box as my desk. I remember memorizing English vocabulary even in my sleep. When we finally came back home from exile, we lived temporarily at someone's empty, unheated home. It was winter and so cold that all my fingers got frostbite. Despite these disadvantages, I studied hard and did well.

After high school I got my BA in theology winning the first prize from a theological seminary. I got another BA in English Literature from another college in Korea. During nine years of my married life, my husband and I were so poor that we moved every year from one rented room to another.

When I immigrated to the U.S. in 1970 I found a land in which everything was entirely different: beautiful, comfortable and with abundant resources. There was a promise of the American dream for anyone who wanted it. However, to my surprise my original pursuit of the American dream gradually faded away because I was afraid that if I followed the American dream I would distance myself from Jesus who lived, loved, served and died homeless, leaving his legacy for us to follow. I did not want to let go of the image of Jesus which inspired me profoundly ever since my teen years, and the pursuit of the American Dream *would* make me betray Jesus.

What is Jesus' dream? I believe he came to the most lowly place, poor and homeless, and he served and loved the poor, sick, abandoned, and homeless by entirely emptying himself. He died the most lonely death of the homeless and was raised from the dead by God. For me, following after Jesus' footsteps is living Jesus' dream. The American Dream *would* have kept me away from this image of complete love and sacrificial sharing. I see Jesus in my homeless friends.

After living in despair as a refugee during the war, I immigrated to the United States. **I lost** my native country, homes, culture, my mother, eldest brother, close friends, and many of my very intimate relatives. In spite of leaving so much behind, my husband, I and our two sons were hopeful and happy to build our life anew in the U.S. For the first seven years, we were working so hard to survive that we didn't realize when the flowery spring had come and gone. The seven years had gone by like seven weeks. In the eighth year, on April 30, 1978, in St. Louis, MO, my 17 year old son died suddenly and

his death hit me so hard that I was broken into thousands of pieces.

The loss of a child is the most devastating loss of all. My pain pierced my heart. I still feel like a piece of shrapnel got stuck in my heart. I woke up weeping, cooked weeping, ate weeping, went to work weeping, went to bed weeping, worshipped, sang and prayed weeping. I even experienced child delivery pain for a whole year. I was hallucinating by sensing some invisible movement following me all around the house. I was hearing movements and sounds coming from the closet in my deceased son's room. I felt like some men in black suits were hiding behind every door in the house. I felt someone's presence behind me all the time. I was so scared that I had to sit leaning on the wall so that nothing was behind me.

I didn't want to live anymore. I had had enough pain and anguish in my life. I told God, *"This is IT! I can't take any more pain. My life must end here. Take my life. Cancel my existence and blot me out of this world. Let the earth open its mouth to swallow me. Don't love me, forgive me, feel sorry for me, comfort me, or save me. I don't want to live any longer in this world. I am not worthy as a woman, as a mother or even as a human being after burying my dear child in the ground. Please kill me, take me away, O God."* Kierkegaard named such a profound despair *"sickness unto death"*. Yes, I was sick unto death! I was emotionally and spiritually lost, homeless, walking around like a zombie. But even in such despair, I went to work and performed my job and daily activities as usual.

I kept pushing God away from me with all my strength. The Bible says Jacob wrestled with God one night to be blessed, but I wrestled with God for a few years to be condemned to death. In spite of my struggle, God grabbed me tight and wouldn't let me go. God confronted me with a message: *"You are denying me because love, compassion, mercy and forgiveness are my very essence. If you deny to accept these, you deny my existence."*

This challenging message awakened me. God's steadfastness and perseverance won the fight over me. I finally surrendered, allowing God to do anything God wanted to do with me because I didn't want the life I had been living. Ever since that time God has been dictating my life and I don't have any response except absolute obedience, for I know that on my own I am worthless. God possessed and enslaved me. If God says "go" I go. If God says "do" I do. Therefore, I no longer exist for myself. If I live, I live for God. If I die, I die for God.

Despite the poverty, war, exile, chronic asthma and bronchitis, and thirteen surgeries -- even today while I am slowly dying with pulmonary fibrosis -- I keep on studying and serving those who share the same pain and suffering as mine. This is the way I share the grace and love that God poured out on me. Perhaps this will continue until I exhaust my last ounce of energy.

In all of my professional life of serving poor and homeless people, **I have carried this belief:** *"Had they acquired college education and job skills, they wouldn't have to depend on welfare and food stamps."* We are living in a day and age that will not allow us to survive if we don't get an education.

As my 80th birthday approached, my son and daughter-in-law wanted to celebrate it in a special way. I had the idea to ask friends and relatives to not give me any birthday gifts, but to instead make contributions toward education funds for the homeless. 200 gracious friends and relatives came to celebrate the event and gave generous contributions which gave birth to the Jean Kim Foundation for the Homeless Education, a 501 C (3) tax exempt, non-profit organization.

Ever since that time, I encourage and urge my homeless friends to pursue and enhance their education. I acquired a Master's degree in Social Work (MSW) from St. Louis University in 1977 at the age of 42. I took core Masters level courses at Fuller Seminary in the 1980s for my ordination at 52 years of age. I went to San Francisco Theological Seminary and got my Doctor of Ministry degree in 2006 at the age of 71. I poured out all my experience in serving the poor and homeless in the U.S. in my 300 page dissertation which became the basis of my five books. I got a wonderfully thorough education and it is my turn to provide educational opportunities for my dear homeless friends.

In addition to these stories I have had several visions of God's calling. In 1988 I was serving in campus ministry at the University of Washington and working with homeless and mentally ill people in downtown Seattle. On Easter night, exactly one year after my ordination, I had a dream in which I was standing inside the front door of a small one-room church. From the midst of an enormous fire, God commanded me to *"plant a cross"* where I was standing, and he said *"it will grow through the roof."* One day after having that dream, I was admitted to Stevens Hospital with a high blood pressure and chest pain. From my hospital bed I asked God what exactly his message to plant to a cross meant. While I was in a dozing state, the whole room turned snow white and the meaning of the dream came clear to me: I must develop a ministry for homeless women. I surrendered to God by responding, *"Yes, yes, I will do it."* "Planting the cross" meant not the dead wooden cross but planting the living cross that represents all who Jesus is; his absolute love, care, compassion, forgiveness, sacrifice, emptying, sharing, and hope for the most poor, homeless, and excluded ones. **So my mission is planting the cross in the souls of my homeless friends and supporters as well. Thanks be to God!**