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# PACIFIC NW

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The widely influential Korean Women's Association started 45 years ago as a Tacoma social group for lonely wives of American servicemen

In the Company  
of Community

# FROM ISOLATION

**Tacoma's Korean Women's Association has grown from a social club to a wide-reaching provider of social services**



**Jane Cho, a Korean-speaking social-service associate at the Korean Women's Association in Tacoma, helps a client, Duck Yi. Cho specializes in Social Security benefits and food-stamp assistance and was helping Yi with his retirement.**



## **EARLY HALF A CENTURY**

later, OK Sun Wilson can still recall the thrill that rose in her chest the first time she spotted a fellow Korean walking down the streets of Tacoma in the early 1970s.

Wilson, now 77, immigrated to the United States in 1968 as the wife of an American serviceman, and even if she thought she knew what to expect, culture shock hit hard. The weather was cold and the food bland. Without anybody to converse with, Wilson didn't speak a word in her native tongue, or see a fellow Korean, for nearly four years.

"I almost lost my language, because I was only speaking English," Wilson says. "It was a lonesome town for Koreans in those days." ►



BY MATT PENTZ • PHOTOS BY ELLEN M. BANNER

# T INCLUSION



**Jung Shin**, right, dances with other seniors at the KWA Community Services Center in Tacoma. The seniors meet every Wednesday and Thursday to dance, play bingo and share lunch.



Over the course of the '70s, that began to change. More servicemen, many with young wives, were recalled to Fort Lewis and McChord Air Force Base from the Korean Peninsula, where war had given way to reconstruction.

Wilson and a group of newer arrivals began congregating at their houses all over Tacoma. Without an Asian grocery in the city at the time, the friends were forced to get creative — substituting crushed red pepper normally used for pizza for a similar, unavailable spice to make kimchi, singing Korean songs from memory.

There were only a dozen or so such women initially, and they existed as a social club more than anything. Until the latter part of the decade, that was enough.

Over time, though, the group's purpose began to shift. As lonely as she'd been in those early years, Wilson soon realized she was one of the lucky ones. She was well-educated, having attended university in Korea, and accepted a job with the Tacoma School District as an elementary schoolteacher within a few years of her arrival.

Many of the more recent immigrants, however, spoke barely a word of English.



The KWA Community Services Center is located in Tacoma.

**Sulja Warnick, one of the original members** of the Korean Women's Association, sits at the dining-room table in her Tacoma home with a few of the articles written about KWA. Warnick is on the KWA board of trustees and is a senior adviser.



**Ok J. Kim, left, gets help** from friends Suk Chaivid and Pok S. Zaboski (in orange) while playing bingo before lunch at KWA in Tacoma.

“They have never imagined American ways of life,” Wilson says. “The only thing they could rely on is their husband, and they thought everything would be OK.”

Oftentimes, everything was. But there were exceptions.

What started as a social group in 1972 incorporated as a nonprofit a few years later. One of the first social services provided by what eventually would be called the Korean Women's Association was domestic-violence counseling. Gradually, its scope expanded to include immigration and naturalization services, then affordable housing, then in-home care for seniors.

As the organization's 45th anniversary celebration nears, later this month, what began as a social outlet for a handful of lonely wives has left an indelible mark on Tacoma and Western Washington.

**S**ULJA WARNICK, like Wilson, one of KWA's founding members, grew up in Daegu, South Korea, during wartime.

“The country we grew up in is not like the Korea now,” Warnick says. “We were hungry all of the time.”

Still, her family was close-knit, and they made do. Warnick, now 75, met her future husband while she was in college in South Korea; she was studying education, and he taught English composition in the aftermath of the war.

“It was not easy,” Warnick says. “My mother was so adamant that I never get married to foreigners.”

Warnick's American boyfriend won over her mother with a simple pledge: They would live in Korea forever. He kept that promise for nearly a decade, until Warnick's mom died. The following year, the couple packed up and moved to his hometown of Tacoma.

Warnick was grateful her husband kept his word for as long as he did, and with two young daughters, she anticipated as warm a welcome from his extended family as hers had offered to him.

“I was so, so excited to come to my husband's hometown,” Warnick says. “The first

day, my dream went ‘bang.’ They didn't take us into their house. They took us to a dingy, dark motel. I was just shocked.”

She spent her first three months in America in a depressed fog, cooped up in that motel room with little to do. Then one day, she took her girls to day care and canvassed the city looking for a teaching job. Few schools accepted her Korean certificate, so she started as a volunteer, then an assistant teacher, before eventually taking a full-time job at a middle school, where she worked for 31 years.

Even all of these years and professional breakthroughs later, she remembers the flush of shame she felt those first few months.

“I felt like my husband's family looked down on me,” Warnick says. “I felt very small. My pride was smashed down. I was a college graduate. I thought that it wasn't fair, the way they treated me.”

That's part of what inspired her involvement with the KWA in the late 1970s. She sensed similar injustice in the experiences of the battered immigrant women she worked with, and she wanted more than anything to help them reclaim their self-esteem and self-worth.

She joined a group that had grown ▶



**Misook Song, a KWA caregiver** who has cared for Pil Joong Kim for five years, brings him a snack in his Seattle apartment. Caregivers generally provide 20 to 180 hours per month of care. Kim, at 100 years old, is very independent and requires only 47 hours of care each month.

slightly under the leadership of founder Kim Nam Hui and other original members like Wilson, but their resources were still limited. The dozen or so group members worked tirelessly to solicit donations from local business owners, particularly from the small number of Korean businesses popping up at the time.

“Every time we showed our face, the owners would hide in the back,” Warnick says.

Eventually, somebody came up with the idea of turning to the government for help. It certainly seemed less labor-intensive than going door-to-door.

“A lot of us were citizens, too, married to citizens,” Warnick says. “So why did we have to do all the work?”

The Korean Women’s Association registered as a nonprofit in 1979. Its first state grant was for \$30,000, to run a meal site for senior citizens.

These days, the in-home care branch of the organization alone has an operating budget of \$36 million. The association has more than 1,400 employees and offices in 11 counties. It estimates that it annually serves more than 150,000 people of more than 40 nationalities.

**I**MMIGRATION MIGHT FEEL like an especially heated topic now, but for as long as there has been a United States,



**Senior City in Federal Way**, managed by KWA, is an affordable-housing option for seniors that is close to bus lines and shopping. The on-site KWA community center provides social services to residents and others living in Federal Way and South King County.

the issue has simmered.

Asian Americans faced a challenging time during the era in which Wilson and Warnick immigrated to the country, with the Vietnam War following the conflict in

Korea. World War II was still not all that far in the past, nor were memories of the Japanese internment camps along the West Coast.

“The landscape in the ’60s and ’70s wasn’t very friendly to anyone who looked Asian of any kind,” says executive director Troy Christensen, from his office at KWA headquarters in Tacoma. “It was very isolating. That’s part of the reason why this strong group of women said that they wanted to move this issue forward in our community. We want to make the Northwest welcoming to those who want to emigrate here.”

Even when put into context in the wider arc of history, the presidential election of Donald Trump and wave of anti-immigrant sentiment accompanying it have strained the resources of and underlined the need for organizations like KWA, Christensen says.

“It has changed some of our practices,” Christensen says. “We make sure people understand, as much as we can understand, what the risks are when leaving the country. There’s fear about going into public places, going to the courthouse, wondering if they’re going to be deported.”

What started as a resource specifically for Koreans now addresses questions and concerns from immigrants from all corners of the globe. Some of the education KWA provides is heartbreaking in its necessity: What would happen to your kids if you were suddenly deported?

Christensen was emphatic when asked whether the role KWA plays in the community is more pressing now than, say, 12 months ago.

“Yes,” he says. “I don’t know what to say other than a resounding yes to that. Absolutely. It’s essential that these kinds of services exist — especially with us being so close to a federal detention center, in Tacoma, it makes us that much more important.”

Christensen points to another watershed moment in the mid-1970s as an example of how Washington state can be an inclusive role model for others.

Following the fall of Saigon in April 1975, and in marked contrast to the governor of California, for example, Washington Gov. Dan Evans announced that the state would take in refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos who were being held up at the border elsewhere. The lasting impact of his decision can be felt even now, in both the demographics and attitudes of the region.



**Sun An, Yon Lepien, Chu K. Shockley, Yang Yu and Misuk Yi** (left to right) work in the kitchen to prepare a meal for the Thursday crowd at KWA in Tacoma.



**Gevn "Tim" Kim, property manager** at The Orchard Project in Roy, a group of affordable single-family homes managed by KWA, prunes one of the 170 apple trees on the property. The apples are harvested in the fall and donated to the Emergency Food Network.

"All you have to do is listen to our governor [Jay Inslee] talk, and how he fights the president's 'travel ban,'" Christensen says. "I think he represents well what we've become

in the Northwest, and particularly in Washington state.

"We want to be welcoming. We want to provide the same opportunities our

ancestors had when they got here. Just because we've been here and don't have a memory of what it's like to come here doesn't mean we can't be welcoming to everyone else."

**O**N A RECENT afternoon, lunch at KWA headquarters in Tacoma was still wrapping up when the line dancing started, toggling seamlessly from American country to Korean pop. The menu, too, was multicultural: Korean-style chicken and kimchi sharing tray space with Romaine salad with ranch dressing and seasoned mushrooms.

At the group's four meal sites — three in the Tacoma area plus one in Federal Way — roughly 360 meals are served per week. Seniors eat free; those under 60 are strongly encouraged to make a \$6 donation.

Upstairs, staff members buzz to and

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**Sherri Gilyard-Smith** stands in front of her home in Roy. Her home is one of five affordable single-family homes in The Orchard Project, run by KWA.

## FROM ISOLATION TO INCLUSION

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fro, organizing one upcoming event or another. Others help manage the group's affordable-housing sites, including the single-family-home Orchard Project in Roy.

Elsewhere at KWA HQ, Miyeoung Lee closes the door of her narrow office, silencing the jumble of languages spoken just outside. As the Social Services director, Lee is in charge of senior services, benefit enrollment and naturalization services — the last of which has been especially popular this year — and heads a staff of 40 employees at three sites.

"It's a lot," Lee says, but with a smile and enthusiasm that suggest she welcomes the challenge.

She has been at KWA for 21 years — "I am aging with this company" — and is emblematic of the second generation of employees who have carried forward the founders' original mission.

Lee, too, is an immigrant, but she came to the United States as a student, not the wife of an American serviceman. She met her future husband while in college at Westminster in Philadelphia, and though she'd originally planned to move back to Korea, he wanted to stay.

Like Wilson and Warnick, Lee considers herself one of the lucky ones, and so

felt a call to use her own comparatively privileged position to help others.

"I studied a lot before I came abroad, in order to succeed, but it was still so short of understanding everything," says Lee.

"After I finished my classes [in college], I'd go to my room and have a headache. I would just lie in bed with a headache. After a while, I'd feel like my brain was blank, because of cultural shock.


"I can't imagine how awful it must be for people who did not prepare anything to come, depending on their husband. Where are they going to go? This is the agency where they can come, and that's the reason why our agency built up."

More than most groups of its kind, even as it has rapidly grown, and even nearly 45 years on, KWA has stayed in close touch with its origins.

That is partially due to keeping early members like Wilson and Warnick in the fold. Each of them still sits on the board of directors, and neither is shy about expressing her opinion if a certain initiative or point of emphasis deviates too far from the organization's original mission.

Both sat in on a recent gathering at KWA headquarters, stuffing care packages for residents of one of the affordable-housing locations. Wilson and Warnick chatted happily with the younger members, helping to carry on the legacy of that original group.

Credit is due, also, to the power of memory and empathy — the fact that, no matter how far they've come, many still can see themselves in the trepidation of the new immigrants that walk in the front door every day.

"It's like how trees grow," Wilson says. "You have to have a root to begin with, and the roots have to be strong to make a beautiful tree. That's what KWA is all about." 


*Matt Pentz is a Seattle-based freelance writer. Ellen M. Banner is a Seattle Times staff photographer.*

wrote, wanting their lives to stay at that comfortable plateau. He wanted bigger endeavors, despite the accompanying risks and debts. The friction between them grew, with no respite between work and home. Ending the marriage did, at least, save their business partnership and their friendship.

At this point, they enjoy a standing date for Sunday dinners with their grown daughters, and say any new partners must join them at the table, or at least have no hard feelings about the tradition.

"It works. This is the happiest we've been in years," Vij wrote. "It's a modern relationship, I suppose."

For her part, Dhalwala said in an email, "I still sigh that Shanik didn't work out." She marvels at the accomplishments of the "amazing" staff she trained, "all women and new immigrants" who had no restaurant experience before coming on board, half from India and the other half from Ethiopia.

For all the ups and downs of the Seattle venture, she said she enjoys visiting the friends she made through Shanik, and misses cooking Indian food here. It was "the best, yet most difficult, experience of my adult life." 

*Rebekah Denn is a Seattle food writer. Reach her at rebekahdenn@gmail.com.*

## Vij's Chai

Makes 6 cups

- 5½ cups water
- 12 to 15 green cardamom pods, lightly crushed
- ½ Tbsp. fennel seeds
- 5 orange pekoe tea bags
- 6 tsp. sugar (optional)
- ¾ cup whole milk (optional)

1. Set a small bowl and tea strainer/sieve beside the stove before you begin.
2. In a kettle or pot, combine the water, cardamom pods and fennel seeds, and bring to a vigorous boil on high heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low, and allow to boil for another 2 minutes.
3. Add the tea bags and sugar, stir well and allow to boil for 1 to 1½ minutes more, or longer if you like a stronger tea.
4. Using the sieve or a large spoon, remove the tea bags and place in the bowl. Add the milk to the pot, and continue to heat through for 45 seconds to 1 minute (you don't want the milk to boil over). Turn off the heat.
5. Place the tea strainer over the mouth of a teapot, and pour the chai into it. Or hold the strainer over individual cups before pouring. Serve immediately.

*From "Vij's Indian" by Meeru Dhalwala and Vikram Vij*

## KOREAN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION 45TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

**When:** 6 p.m. Oct. 14

**Where:** Greater Tacoma Convention Center

**Program:** Keynote speakers include Washington Lieutenant Gov. Cyrus Habib and Attorney General Bob Ferguson. The event will include an interactive historical timeline and a cocktail hour.

**Tickets:** Prices start at \$100.

**For more information:** [event@kwacares.org](mailto:event@kwacares.org), [kwacares.org/kwa45](http://kwacares.org/kwa45) or 253-538-8369