

T. Minorities

Koreans

The quiet power of

AUG 5 1990 TNT

'Korea Town'

KOREANA
Playa
 코리아나프리카
 9312

RESTAURANT
 KOREAN & CHINESE OPEN 24 HRS.
 COCKTAILS

Business world and politics start to notice impact

By Kim Severson
The News Tribune

Almost every week, Suk Arbeeny leaves her Lakewood home and wheels her station wagon onto South Tacoma Way.

Here, among strip malls flush with Korean advertising and brand-name products from her homeland, Arbeeny chats with her Korean friends over bowls of seaweed soup and kim chee pungent with red peppers and cabbage.

This roughly 25-block slice of South Tacoma Way provides a sort of cultural salve for the bright, 34-year-old legal assistant who left Korea with her American husband 10 years ago.

"If I miss Korea, I just come down here and have lunch and talk with the Korean people," she said. "I really feel like this is Korea and I am just visiting my neighbors."

But there's more than cultural comfort on the strip of businesses sandwiched between Tacoma's South

■ Serving up a dream — Korean-style. **Back page.**

End and McChord Air Force Base. Pierce County's

"Korea Town" holds the heart of a community whose economic impact and political potential are silently but powerfully changing the face of the county.

Bolstered by a recent wave of immigration from other states — in 1989 an estimated 5,000 Koreans moved to the Puget Sound area from such cities as Los Angeles, New York and Chicago — and growing increasingly secure financially, the Puget Sound Korean community is poised for a new, more vibrant chapter, according to people inside and outside the community.

More than any time in the 40-year history of Korean immigration to the area, the 1990s mark an era when Koreans become full-fledged players in the community, they say.

"The growth is phenomenal, absolutely phenomenal — explosive is the word. What's happening now is way beyond just the GI wives and their relatives," said Charles Herrmann, the Tacoma attorney who employs Arbeeny and more than a dozen other Asian liaisons in his firm.

Herrmann is part of a team of attorneys who represent the families of 89 Koreans killed when Korean Air Lines Flight 007 was shot down by the Soviets in 1983.

Korean leaders optimistically estimate that 35,000 Koreans live in the Tacoma-Pierce County area. About the same number live in King County, they say.

Other experts, including census officials and Western Washington University Asian scholar and author Robert Kim, say no more than 20,000 Koreans live in the Pierce County area and another 20,000 to 25,000 in the Seattle-King County area.

In Pierce County, even the lowest estimates show the Korean population makes up about 4 percent of the population, about half the county's black popula-

Please see **Korea**, back page



Russ Carmack/The News Tribune

The neon signs of South Tacoma Way reflect the remarkable economic success the Korean community has had in the Puget Sound area. But the next generation, made up of bright

young people like Mina Hong, 13, and Susan Gwon, 12, above, attending a Bible study class at the New Life Church in Parkland, is expected to wield more political power.

Korea

Continued from A1

tion.

King County Koreans, although tied more tightly to the international market, are spread out and lack the middle-class, neighborly feel that marks the more concentrated Pierce County Korean community, they say.

Regardless of the actual head count, the size and strength of the Korean community can be measured through its churches and associations, both of which serve as informal governments and mediators for Korean immigrants.

In Pierce County, there are more than 30 Korean Christian churches. King County has another 40. Between the two communities, more than a dozen Korean social and business organizations thrive.

The Pierce County Korean community remains larger and generally more financially set than groups such as Samoans, Cambodians or Vietnamese. The latter group, for example, numbers about 5,000 and carries less financial weight, Herrmann said.

With such numbers, the Korean community represents a potential pool of voters and consumers being courted heavily by politicians, bankers and businesses.

More than anything else, the financial boom exploding in the region's Korean community provides the group with muscle. It's exemplified best along South Tacoma Way.

The strip is home to the state's only Korean credit union, which opened five months ago and boasts 500 members, \$2.5 million in deposits and \$1.3 million in loans.

Further, an unscientific survey done through the daily Korea Times newspaper by a worker in Herrmann's legal firm found that about 47 percent of the store-front businesses along that strip of South Tacoma Way were owned by Koreans.

This year, more than 800 Korean-owned small businesses exist in the state. More than 35 percent of those are in the Pierce County area, largely along South Tacoma Way, said Sang In Yun, a Federal Way resident and chairman of the Korean Chamber of Commerce.

Yun said that over the last few years, the number of Korean-owned businesses in the state has increased by about 10 percent a year. It's a trend he says will continue.

Bolstered by a burgeoning economy in South Korea and changes in how much money the Korean government allows to be carried to America by immigrants and industries, the past two years have seen a sharp increase in the financial base being built here, said professor Robert Kim, who traced the Korean immigrants' experience in his recent book, "Koreans in America: Dreams and Realities."

When immigration began after the war, Koreans were limited to bringing in only \$100 from their homeland. With the current hot economy in Korea, there is no limit on the amount of money individuals can bring, said K.J. Kim, manager at the Seattle-based Exchange Bank of Korea. However, there are still restrictions for individual investors, restrictions that change frequently.

Further, Kim says people who bought

small businesses 10 years ago are beginning to pay off debts and reinvest their money in bigger ventures, borrowing more money either from banks eager to lend to Koreans or, to a lesser degree, from families or from a traditional system of small, informal rotating credit groups called "kyes."

Doug Harris, ad director of the Asia Media Group, an agency that translates ads for retailers who want to advertise in Asia-language newspapers, says Koreans in particular are attractive to both banks and retailers — including major department stores that are increasingly interested in buying ads in the two largest-circulation Korean papers that circulate locally.

"The mortality rate in Korean businesses is low," Harris said. "Banks really look at it and say 'geez, let's get in on it — these businesses can't lose.'"

There also is an influx of money coming from Koreans who paid their dues in big cities such as New York or Los Angeles and now are looking to lucrative Pacific Northwest markets. The reputation of the Puget Sound Korean community is a draw.

On a larger financial scale, South Korea is Washington's third-largest foreign trading partner, according to the Seattle-based South Korean consulate general. Puget Sound ports handle more than \$5 billion in South Korean trade a year, and about \$500 million in export money annually passes through the Seattle branch of the Exchange Bank of Korea.

"Quite frankly, there is a lot of money in the Korean community," said Robert Kim.

The Korean financial force is far more visible than the community's political muscle. However, Puget Sound politicians who recognize the subtle power held by the Korean community have begun a courtship.

Pierce County Executive Joe Stortini, who comes from an Italian immigrant family, is a frequent guest at Korean restaurants and community gatherings, where his Korean colleagues jokingly call him "Mr. Kim Chee." Stortini says he identifies with struggles faced by new immigrants, and Korean leaders identify with him.

That relationship became an asset during the county's recent battle to keep Lakewood from becoming a city.

Lakewood voters agreed to remain a part of the county by a margin of about 2,000 votes. Although immigration officials and community leaders agree that only about half the Koreans in Pierce County are U.S. citizens and only about 30 percent of that number vote, the Lakewood-centered Korean community could have swung the Lakewood election either way.

"We were looking for the Korean community to come forward and say, 'We like working with county and they're good neighbors,'" said Stortini.

Local politicians vow to continue listening to the Korean community. Whether it's pressure to recruit sheriff's deputies from the Korean community, a call for better social services or demands for interpretive services in schools and courts, the Koreans have a say.

The power of the Korean community is quiet and subtle, said Lea Armstrong of the Korean Women's Association of Tacoma. Armstrong, a Kent resident whom many Koreans consider the mother of Pierce County's Korean community, began her community work in the county almost 20



Russ Carmack/The News Tribune

Many traditional elements of Korean culture are kept alive in this country, such as this bean-bag game played at a recent picnic in Point Defiance Park.

years ago when she helped Korean women who married American soldiers learn to cook American food and speak English.

"We could have changed the election, but Pierce County has been very good to the Korean community," she explained.

Armstrong and other Puget Sound Korean leaders make frequent trips to other seats of local government or to Olympia.

"We watch very closely politics. . . . Pro-Korean or anti-Korean, that's all that matters," she said.

But there's evidence Koreans might soon become a more vocal force in the state.

In June, Armstrong led about 75 people from the Korean community to join a large rally against the Populist Party, a group believed to have ties to a white supremacy movement.

The Koreans' participation was prompted by a bombing plot FBI agents uncovered in the spring. Korean-owned businesses along South Tacoma Way were among targets picked by three members of an Idaho-based white supremacy group who devised the plot.

It was an extraordinary event, marking

the first time Pierce County Koreans participated in such an organized, political demonstration.

"They're trying to kill us, OK?" said Armstrong. "We won't just sit there."

Still, the rally was the exception, not the rule. Armstrong and Kim agree it will be years before Koreans establish themselves in regional politics and government.

First-generation immigrants, only about 30 percent of whom are fluent in English, are loath to get involved in boards or commissions. Even American-style business associations such as the Lakewood Chamber of Commerce, which holds not a single Korean member, remain unattractive.

Koreans prefer their own organizations, believing most immigrants either don't yet know enough about American governmental systems or that American business organizations have little to offer.

"They say we have to pay membership, but what really can they do for us?" asked Armstrong.

Repeatedly, Koreans point out the difference in language as the key barrier to merging the two worlds. Although English

classes abound at community centers, churches and schools, many Koreans don't immediately take advantage of such programs.

"When immigrants are first here, survival is more important than learning English," said Suk Arbeeney.

With a cultural center such as South Tacoma Way, Koreans can handle day-to-day tasks without ever having to learn English. They rely on their children, educated in American schools, to translate necessary papers and conversations.

Those children will be the ones to break into the world of American politics, Korean leaders say.

"(Parents) came here for the second generation. They're working 365 days a year, 60 hours a week — as long as their kids are going to graduate from a good school," said Arbeeney, who has two young children.

"When it comes to politics, we are waiting for the second generation," said Armstrong. "We work hard. We pave the road for them. It's all we can do — work hard."

That work ethic, characterized by couples who work multiple jobs and save money at amazing rates to buy small businesses and send their children to good schools, is at the center of the Korean immigration experience.

Immigrants take two or three jobs, take few days off and live with extended families in cramped quarters. That frugality provides a base for loans to create small businesses, Kim said.

But the gains have not been without a price.

Recently, a joint Pierce County government-Korean community proposal to erect bilingual "Korea Town" signs along the strip drew angry reaction from Caucasian business owners who privately complain that Koreans are taking over the area.

The Rev. Yu Lim of the 600-member New Life Presbyterian Church in Parkland dismisses people who practice discrimination as "godless." Most Koreans are ashamed of such discrimination, he said. Others are angry.

But community leaders believe the social problems Koreans encounter as they struggle to make a new home in America cut deeper than discrimination.

Divorce rates are higher among Koreans who come to America than those who stay in their homeland. Parents worry that children growing up surrounded by American culture are losing respect for traditional Korean ways and for their elders. And the huge amount of time Korean families spend working causes a stressful life.

But as the Korean community struggles with such problems, it will continue to grow stronger and ultimately find a balance between a traditional Korean lifestyle and American success, community leaders predict. Once that balance is found, the Korean community will step deeper into established, American systems of government and business.

Attorney Herrmann predicts it will be one powerful step.

"I don't think the Korean community has really begun to flex its muscle politically. They have the muscle, but they don't flex it. When they do, it'll be big."