

Standing Up by Speaking Up

Category: Across Borders and Cultures

written by Jenny Kwak | March 2, 2017

My parents immigrated to the U.S. from Korea when I was two, in 1972. We were lucky we left when we did, or my father, a pro-democracy professor at Korea University during Park Chung-Hee's regime, might have been jailed. We were also lucky my mother was a pharmacist, as the U.S. was accepting pharmacists and nurses then. We moved to Seattle and made our home there.

We experienced racism on a daily basis. But we persevered and tried our best to assimilate. My sister and I learned English quickly. My parents had a harder time; their English proficiency never improved much. They owned a grocery store and bought property so they could succeed despite their limited communication ability. My sister and I became their voices in business matters and during medical appointments.

They worked hard so their children could have a future. I became a social worker because I saw the cracks and nightmares that immigrants face. I have now been a social worker for 26 years. I have seen both beautiful, life-affirming events and evil—sometimes within the same hour.

I always saw my role as standing up for justice. But when I wanted to “rock the boat,” my parents often wanted me to stay silent. But I showed them over the years that I could save others' lives by speaking up, by using my voice to calm people and keep them from making horrible decisions. My mother grew to be proud of me for speaking up for those who could not speak up themselves.

Now, Alzheimer's disease has taken away her voice. But it has strengthened mine. I am her voice during her interactions with healthcare providers. I also recognize that while I am a caregiver, I sometimes need caregiving myself.

My mother's situation reminds me that I must speak up, that I must not sit down while others are told they don't have a seat at the table. I will continue to fight for those like my mother who aren't heard—whether because of disease or because their voices are drowned out.

As a descendant of strong Korean immigrants who came to the U.S. to make a better life, I am emboldened to help others find their voices. As a social worker, I help patients navigate the complicated healthcare system, I help people overcome barriers, I stand up and speak up for those who seek a future free from hatred.

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