



Success Story Brief

Dr. Young-Woo Kang: A Triumph in Faith

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Mission:

To increase employment opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with disabilities nationwide.

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Portrait prepared by David E. Starbuck

The following is one in a series about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with disabilities who embody the following quote: "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination are omnipotent. The slogan 'press on' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race."

- Calvin Coolidge -

Introduction

To consider just how instantaneously disability can alter all of our lives, think back to when you were thirteen.. Think of playing with your friends in the schoolyard when a soccer ball flies through the air, hits you square between the eyes and knocks you to the ground.

After many doctor visits, two years later, you lay in a hospital bed in total darkness. The doctor tells you the most recent operation to re-attach your retinas was unsuccessful--you will be blind for the rest of your life! How do you feel? Soon after that, the news of your blindness shocks your only surviving parent so much, she suffers a massive stroke and dies. You are not only blind; you are orphaned too. How do you feel?

Thirteen year-old Young-Woo Kang knew how it felt. He was that young schoolboy on a playground in Korea in 1958. "My mother visited me in the hospital three days a week," he said. "One day she visited me and I told her the terrifying news that I would become permanently blind. She was so shocked that she died of a stroke on the same day."

Today, however, his life represents one of the most dynamic success stories in the history of Americans with disabilities. This young Korean boy whose life took such a dramatic turn has become a world-renowned professor, motivational speaker, author and advocate for people with disabilities while his autobiography, *A Light in My Heart*, has been translated into six languages and made into an award winning movie.

Yet at the time of this tragedy the depth of despair proved so excruciating for Young-Woo Kang, he attempted to end his life by ingesting rat poison. To com-

prehend the profundity of his hopelessness he says it is necessary to understand just how negative the attitudes toward persons with disabilities were at that time in Korean society.

“In Korea the negative attitude toward handicapped people, particularly for the blind, used to be pretty harsh,” he said. “For example, they used to believe that if they saw a blind person on the street they would have bad luck for the rest of the day. So who dared help a blind person? Even bus drivers and taxi cab drivers tried to avoid blind people because they were afraid they would have bad accidents.”

After his mother died, Kang’s older sister dropped out of high school at age 16 to find employment. No social service, or economic, support systems for people with disabilities existed. She found a job in the garment industry and worked hard. But after becoming physically and psychologically exhausted, she also died.

“So I had to send my nine-year-old sister to the orphanage and 13-year-old younger brother to a hardware store to work,” he said. “Then I started my own rehabilitation at the Rehabilitation Center for the Blind.”

Only two occupations were open to the blind--fortune telling and oriental massage, Kang said. “Those were the only options open to me,” he said, “but I could not accept it. I had a dream to go to college which was an unheard of dream at that time. The university denied my first applications. The negative attitudes were that bad. But I could not give up.”

During the Korean War, Kang’s parents provided shelter to people fleeing North Korea. One such refugee became the General Secretary of the Korean National Council on Churches. He petitioned Yonsei University to give Kang a chance to take the entrance examination. “And so I took it,” he said, “and I not only passed it, I placed 10th among thousands of applicants. That was my first victory fighting against negative attitudes toward blind persons. My first dream had come true.”

Kang graduated as a straight-A student with the second highest honor in the entire University. He dreamed of pursuing graduate studies in America. At that time, however, the ministry of education embraced a discriminatory rule that prohibited Korean citizens with disabilities from traveling abroad to study. Once again, Kang refused to accept injustice.

“I could not give up,” he said. “I could not give up on my dream. So I decided to fight and I found some people who were with me. I succeeded in eliminating that discriminatory regulation and became the first Korean handicapped student to be allowed to come to America to do graduate studies.”

With a scholarship from the Rotary International Foundation, Kang earned Master’s degrees in special education and rehabilitation counseling, and a Ph.D. in education in the span of four years at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Kang secured American citizenship in 1978 and became an adjunct professor at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago a year and a half later.

Today, through the power of personal determination, coupled with a self-declared profound faith in God, Dr. Young-Woo Kang, nominated by President George W. Bush and confirmed by the U.S. Senate, is one of 15 members of the National Council on Disability, an independent federal agency which makes recommendations to the President and Congress on issues affecting 54 million Americans with disabilities. In his letter of recommendation, past Attorney General Dick Thornburg said, “Dr. Kang has not only overcome his disability but he also transformed it into an asset...”

“I have come from bad luck to a Presidential appointee requiring Senate confirmation,” Dr. Kang said. “I have come this far through my positive attitude and self-empowerment. Self-empowerment for disabled people is very important. Without that I would not be here as one of only 17 Asian American Presidential appointees requiring Senate confirmation...”

“Every individual has strengths and weaknesses. I do not consider my blindness a handicap. It is a blessing; it is a tool to encourage many, many people including disabled and disadvantaged people to seek their own rehabilitation. And my blindness is a tool to encourage many powerful and wealthy people, including heads of state, to be more compassionate for all people regardless of their minority and disability status... So my blindness has affected me positively. My attitude has been changed.”

Dr. Kang said his blindness not only changed his life positively, it affected each of his family members’ lives positively as well.

“My wife became a teacher for the visually impaired because of my blindness,” he said. “So she has been rewarding lives as a public school teacher for more than a quarter century.”

He and his wife have two sons, both of whom are married and enjoying fulfilling careers. To exemplify the long term effects of choosing to develop a positive attitude throughout his life, he tells the true story of one of his sons.

“When Paul was three years old he reacted to my blindness. In other words, my blindness served as a stimulus to him. He prayed to God one day, ‘Dear God, I wish that I could have a seeing daddy. Please give sight back to my dad so he can play baseball with me, drive with me, and teach me to ride my bicycle.’ His attitude toward my blindness was reflected in his prayer. But half of his prayer contained a negative attitude because he saw his blind father as someone who could not play baseball, drive, or teach him to ride his bicycle. Those negative attitudes needed to be changed. So I told him that your sighted mom can drive, play baseball with you and show you how to ride your bicycle, so you don’t need your daddy’s help with those things. But, as a blind person, I have something I can do better than your sighted mother. He asked, ‘What’s that?’ I said every evening I read a bedtime story to you in the darkness without light but your mother cannot. He had been aware of that but he had never thought about it that way.

“From that point on he was looking for what a blind person could do rather than what he cannot do. His attitude had been changed. And he said, ‘Daddy, I will become a doctor and fix your eyes when I grow up.’

“So I reinforced his idea. He had a dream to become an eye doctor from this beginning and his wonderful dream has come true! He went to one of the best college prep schools and moved on to Harvard. He has become an ophthalmologist and is working at Duke University Medical Center.

“When he applied to Harvard there was a question on the application asking for the most significant event or experience in your life. My son’s topic was ‘Bedtime Story in the Darkness.’ His essay reflected all his positive attitudes toward his blind father and he said he is really fortunate to have a blind father. If and when the children of people with disability have this type of attitude, all of them will be successful like my son. The Harvard University admissions director said, ‘We need people like your son with that kind of attitude.’”

Dr. Kang’s youngest son, Christopher, is a lawyer and became a legal counsel on the Judiciary Committee of the U.S. Senate—the youngest counsel among several hundred lawyers. “He is already making a big impact on improving the lives of people with disabilities,” Dr. Kang said.

In short, Dr. Kang said, in rehabilitation and education for people with disabilities, attitudes and values are the keys to success.

“I do not underestimate the difficulty of functional restoration because disability affects the effectiveness of the body as a tool,” he said. “But those attitudes and values for the people with the disability and for the non-disabled people are more important...”

“I am blind and I do not deny that my blindness causes many inconveniences. But my blindness also helped me to meet so many compassionate and caring people including former president George Bush. After reading his autobiography, President Bush wrote to Dr. Kang and said, “Your book is inspirational to countless people with and without disabilities.” While serving on the World Committee on Disabilities, Dr. Kang came in contact with the president and asked him one day, “What inspired you so much about a Korean blind man’s simple story, and he replied, ‘Your story contains noble human values that transcend culture and language.’ I was so curious, so I asked, what are those noble human values? He replied, ‘Your book reflected faith, compassion, self-determination, and persistence.’ In other words, my disability served as a stimulus to me. I could generate a strong faith in God, persistence, and self-determination. My disability also served as a stimulus to other people, compassionate people.”

Dr. Kang speaks publicly throughout the world and often closes his talks with the prayer of an unknown Confederate soldier, a prayer, he says, “that has become my own:”

“I asked God for strength that I might achieve.

I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do greater things.

I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy.

I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might get the praise of men.

I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.

I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for,

but everything that I had hoped for.”

Dr. Young-Woo Kang’s determination to turn disabilities into assets throughout his life continues to help forge significant improvements in the lives of people with disabilities throughout the world.

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