



Success Story Brief

The Truth Will Set You Free

National Technical Assistance Center

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Mission:

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

Based at:

University of Hawai'i
at Manoa, Center on
Disability Studies

In collaboration with:

Hawaii Centers for
Independent Living
Hawaii Vocational
Rehabilitation and
Services for the Blind
Division

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The following is the fifth in a series of portraits of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with disabilities who have embodied 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

On Saturday, September 7th, 1985, I was a promising youth of 24. I had been selected as an honor graduate student with a government scholarship to the KAIST (Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology). The Korean government provided full tuition and living expenses and exempted my military duty. This is the greatest benefit that can be achieved in Korea. I was studying in the fourth, and last, semester for a master's degree in Industrial Engineering.

That night I fell off the roof of my friend's house when I mis-stepped. I was injured at the fifth cervical cord and became quadriplegic, unable to move any part of my body below the upper chest. I cannot move any fingers at all and cannot stretch my arm. To make matters worse, I cannot control my bladder or bowel.

Doctors said I could not recover. I had to live the rest of my life riding a wheelchair as a quadriplegic. My mother wept beside my bed every night. She and my father said they wanted to throw themselves out the window to their deaths. Though many friends showed their hospitality by keeping me company at my bedside in the hospital, they couldn't find any words to console me.

I could see and feel only darkness. No one could deliver me from this darkness. Nothing could help me. Even though contemporary science and medicine boast advanced technologies, they couldn't do anything for me. There was nothing that I could rely on. In front of me, there seemed to be only deep and endless darkness.

Then, my older sister suggested that our family return to God. All our family members went to the Catholic Church during my childhood. We left the church as I was growing up. My mother worshipped Buddha. We accepted my sister's suggestion and returned to church. After I was discharged, I began to read the Bible at home. I stopped at John 8:32 and I was shocked: "The truth will set you free". It was my favorite maxim. It was the precept of my University. My university had been founded as the first university in Korea by an American Presbyterian missionary. But I had never thought about that phrase as God's word. I liked the word because I thought it meant we could achieve spiritual enlightenment – attain Nirvana - via scholastic pursuit and I could realize the principle of all things under the sun and be free from worldly trivial things. Therefore I liked it and it gave me the vision in my life. I had to pursue scholastic accomplishment and try to do my best to enjoy my life with my own philosophy.

But I realized the truth as I read the Bible. I could feel a real freedom. I could really be free even if I was paralyzed in my body. I could believe in Jesus, rely on Him, and take refuge in Him. He said "I will be with you." I realized I could have everything in Him even though I lost everything.

For the first five years after the accident, I could do nothing except pray and read the Bible. But then I bought a personal computer (PC) and with it I could put myself to work by editing booklets and teaching handicapped children how to use the PC at home. Three more years passed and I was able to buy a powered wheelchair, which enabled me to work in an office environment. Then, finally, when I installed the internet connection at home, I could reach the whole world via the net.

After I met the Lord, I overcame my depression and weakness. I tried to find out what I could do. The Lord allowed me to work for a small company, serve the Korean missionary association for people with spinal cord injury (SCI), and teach information technology for people with SCI and rehabilitation science in a college.

I worked as a computer programmer for Gongshin Engineering Ltd., which made CNC (Computer Numeric Control) pipe bending machineries. I worked for the Korea Wheel Spinal Cord Injury Missionary Association developing and managing an Internet community website for people with SCI and educating them about Information Technologies for their vocational rehabilitation. I also taught students as a visiting lecturer at the Department of Rehabilitation Engineering at Korea Nazarene University.

My situation, however, is a rare, rather exceptionally fortunate case among Koreans with disabilities. I was highly educated and my parents could afford to purchase the desired apparatuses for me. Most Koreans with spinal cord injury (SCI) have to stay home, not even aware that there exist such useful devices. For their sake, I opened an internet site that provided rehabilitation information. As my commitment bore its fruits, I managed to educate and find jobs for some people with disabilities. In addition, I held some events to propagate the information on what SCI is and also to prove that wheelers can do something.

I taught college students rehabilitation engineering related classes in a Korean university. But I felt I didn't have enough knowledge to teach students. I then wanted to go study Rehabilitation Engineering in America.

Twenty years ago, when I fell from the roof of my friend's house and the accident left me completely paralyzed below my chest with the fifth cervical cord in my neck injured, I could not even move a finger. At that time, I thought my life ended. I could not even roll my body to the side in the bed nor could I push the (manual) wheelchair by myself. I kept thinking, "Now, what can I possibly do?"

If there were no powered wheelchair, PC, or the Internet, where would I be today? Assistive Technology played a very important role in my new life in the wheelchair. I wanted to help other people with disabilities to get over their limitations through the appropriate assistive technologies. This is the very reason I decided to go to study in America. I applied for the Ph. D. program of the department of Rehabilitation Science

and Technology of the University of Pittsburgh. God led me to Pittsburgh, U.S., to come and study rehabilitation science and technology with the eventual mission of helping people with disabilities.

Though I had to leave behind many people and work that needed my attention, I thought it best for my future contribution to them that I should now go to America for study. Even though I had not studied for the 16 years since I was injured, I was ready to meet the challenge.

I started my Ph.D. program in fall 2001. Pressure ulcers in my buttock and urinary tract infection threatened me continuously for 4 years. I had to lay down on the bed for three months and go to the Emergency Room several times for urinary tract infections. Therefore I was not able to study as much as I wanted. But older students who speak English as a second language need to study more hours than other young American students. I prayed to the Lord, who comforted and encouraged me and gave me the strength and wisdom to concentrate.

I defended my Ph.D. dissertation successfully Aug. 17, 2005. At the end of my presentation of the dissertation, I had to thank many people. Besides God, my advisor and professors, and my family, I thanked my caregivers, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, the bus drivers of the public bus that provided me accessible transportation, and the university disability service office. All these people worked with me and helped me get a Ph.D. degree.

Life is a series of adventures in God. My faith in God has supported me well in my changing situations so far, and I have always managed to make the best of my given circumstances. I trust that God will guide me through the coming paths as He has always done so far. With Him watching over my steps, I shall succeed in my new adventure.

Right now I work for the University of Pittsburgh as a task leader at the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Telerehabilitation. I am developing a remote accessibility assessment system using virtual reality technology, which would enable the accessibility assessment of the built environment for people with disabilities without a home modification specialist's site visit. I am also developing a remote wheelchair prescription system using the videoconferencing system and web-based multimedia decision supporting system, with which a person who needs a wheeled mobility device can get a specialist's evaluation for his/her special need in remote sites without visiting the clinic.

I realized one thing through the bitterness of my life. God helps those who help themselves. When I shut myself up, nobody could help me. Our friends and neighbors wanted to help me but they didn't know what I needed. Even if I could not speak English well, as an Asian alien in the U.S., and had lots of functional limitations on my body, the community was ready to help me and I was able to accomplish whatever other people were able to do when I tried to do so with positive beliefs.

I want to emphasize that everyone with disabilities needs to try any assistive technology they can get, because the assistive technology of an adaptive computer and a powered wheelchair changed my life as much as God.

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