

Interview with Cindy Ryu

기독교 여성과 정치 참여 • Cindy Ryu 시장 인터뷰

BY UNZU LEE



Political engagement is nothing new for people of faith. Cindy Ryu, the first female Korean American mayor in the United States, sees civic engagement as essential for all people. She talked with Unzu Lee, PW program associate, about how her faith journey led her into the political realm.

Horizons is the official magazine of Presbyterian Women. Would you introduce yourself to the readers by sharing some information about your life journey?

I was born on November 14, 1957 in Seoul, Korea to Kim Jae Il (Hwang Hae Do) and Kim Seong Suk (pronounced Sook – Pyong An Nam Do) who were displaced by the Korean War. My dad served in the Army and was already in the south; my mom and half of her family escaped to the south.

I attended Ma Po Gu Yong Gang Dong's Shin Seok Kook Min Hak Kyo until fourth grade. In 1967, when I was nine, we left Korea to join my dad in Brunei, where he had been working to earn money as many men did overseas during this economically challenging period of Korean history. My three brothers and I—I was the second oldest—attended private Anglican schools in Brunei so we could learn English. We lived among the Malays then Chinese. My mom started taking in sewing at home to supplement my dad's income for tuition.

In 1969, when I was 11, we went to Manila, Philippines, to apply for and wait for visas to immigrate to the United States. Apparently my parents worried we'd run out of money before we received visas, so we were eating one meal a day for a while during the two months we were there. We received our visas and arrived at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport on Christmas Eve in 1969.

We settled in an area called Gate, Washington, 30 minutes away from Centralia. Ed and Frances Hamilton were neighbors, and asked if we would like to attend church with them. My mom had not attended church since her marriage

(my dad is not a Christian) and had not raised us in her faith. Going to church with the Hamiltons was a new adventure for me. That they sometimes bought us ice cream cones on the way home made the long way home even better!

I graduated from Centralia High School in 1976 in the top ten of my class and was voted the girl most likely to succeed. During my undergraduate (BS in microbiology, 1980) and graduate (MBA, 1983) years at the University of Washington, I wandered away from the church. I had dreamt of becoming a missionary doctor, but despite good grades and great MCAT scores, I stammered and whispered through my medical school exams and was not accepted. I gave up that dream, and decided to get a practical degree, earn money and perhaps help send someone else into missions later.

When did you join the Presbyterian Church? How do you participate in the life and work of the church?

By 1983, I was attending a very small Korean Methodist church, at my mom's urging. The pastor promised he would introduce me to a very nice man if I would play the piano at his church. In February 1983, a nice couple came, and the next Sunday, a 30-year-old man with a bowl haircut and very ill-fitting jacket came with them. Our families met formally, and Ryu Chang Myung and I started dating each other. He said he smoked just a little, drank just a little, and attended church. A week in, I said there was no reason for us to continue seeing each other unless we planned on getting married. We got married four months later at Seattle Yon Hap Jang Ro Kyo Hwe, which was renting space from Trinity Presbyterian Church. Even though Cody (my husband's anglicized

Shoreline Mayor Seattle, Washington

name) was a part of the founding membership of the church with his parents, his faith did not exist or grow until nearly 20 years later. He is now a deacon, an assistant to a few elders and leads the Men's Missions for his age group.

We had three children—Candice Hae Sun Ryu, Christine Hae Young Rue and Cody Hyun Geun Ryu. I served in the preschool and Yoo Nyun Boo for about 17 years as the snack provider, then a Sunday School teacher. The last few years, I pinch hit as the service leader. I had come a

75 percent of them are white; 13 percent, Asian; 3 percent, Hispanic; and 2 percent, black. It has an economically diverse population and a wonderful public school system. Since the 1990s, Shoreline has had a Korean Councilmember—Cheryl Lee (Lee Seung Ryung), 1995–2001; John Chang (Chang Tae Soo), 2002–2005; and then me.

You can learn more about Shoreline at www.cityofshoreline.com.

What motivated you to get involved in politics?

Shoreline has a major north-south arterial known as Aurora Avenue. It was being redeveloped and that work was going to affect our insurance business and commercial property. As I attended public meetings, I realized that I needed to pay more attention and voice my opinions. I looked at how decisions were being made by Shoreline policy makers and found many

facts or opinions voiced by the public were being ignored. As I was a trained scientist, I found Council members not doing their homework very disturbing.

I ran for the first time in 2003, and lost by only 800 votes. The next year, I coordinated the 32nd Legislative District Democrat's state and national campaigns. By the time I ran again for another position in 2005, my campaign was much more efficient and I won by nearly 2,000 votes.

What are your joys and challenges of being a public servant?

How do your ethnicity and gender help you or disadvantage you in your work as a public servant?

The joys of being a policy maker at a local level are that I see the results right away. Shoreline is the 15th largest city in Washington State, and has enough critical mass to get things moving. Yet we're small enough to have the majority behind us on many issues. As mayor, I am finding deep satisfaction in the crafting of our agenda as well as how the policies look even before the votes are taken.

My ethnicity helps in that in Washington State, Asians and specifically Koreans are assumed to be smart and hard workers. Being female, I was accused of being shrill, so I lowered my voice for the first two years on the council. I still speak with an accent and stumble over some words. I have received anonymous calls stating no commercial signs along Aurora should be in any language but English. I think the fact that I'm a person of color, other minorities consider me approachable.

The biggest personal challenge has been the amount of time I devote to this role. I spent about 30 hours a week as a Council member. Now I spend upwards of 60 hours per week as mayor. My husband and I owned a very lucrative insurance agency, but we've had to sell the agency since I spent more time on political work.

Historically, people of faith have participated in politics in a variety of ways. As a person of faith, how would you describe your own faith journey in relation to your political involvement.

I see my growth as a person and all my experiences, including the difficult and undesirable ones, as preparation for public office and the role of policy maker. Even my memory of being hungry in Manila helps me



Cindy Ryu with her husband, Cody Chang Myung Ryu, son Cody Hyun Geun the day of election 1/7/08

long way, grabbing the microphone and keeping the attention of 60–80 children. I assisted one of the Children's Ministry directors, requesting funding, talking to the elders. I found the need to speak up on behalf of the children and the director—hence I learned politics at church.

You've served on the City Council for Shoreline, Washington, since 2006, and were elected mayor of Shoreline in 2006. How would you describe Shoreline?

There are approximately 53,000 people in Shoreline—approximately



SHORELINE CITY COUNCIL: Front row, from left: Deputy Mayor Terry Scott, Mayor Cindy Ryu and Janet Way. Back row, from left: Keith McGlashan, Chris Eggen, Doris McConnell and Ron Hansen.

empathize with the most vulnerable and needy in our society. I am very happy to be where I am today.

When I married into the Ryu family 25 years ago, the United Presbyterian Church of Seattle was not the church of my choice. I felt unhappy and like I did not fit in. As I grew, the church helped me come to terms with my strengths and weaknesses. It provided much needed social support and definition of who I am as a Korean and as an American. When I see newcomers looking lost, I smile and greet them, whether they think I'm confused or not!

There are many people in this country concerned with changing our current form of democracy from a governance by experts to a governance by ordinary citizens. How would you describe the status of ordinary Korean American women's participation in the civic life in the United States?

Having started at the grassroots and being involved in local politics, my view is that ordinary citizens must be involved, if nothing else, at least to voice their opinions. Experts or professional politicians may be resources to achieve a community's goals, but should not be

the ones imposing their priorities over the community's priorities.

In both the Democratic and Republican parties in Washington State, persons of color mostly do not participate at the grassroots, local or state levels. Even with its history with an Asian governor, politics here is still a white person's world.

What are the barriers to Korean American women's participation in the civic life, and what could we do to move Korean American women past the barriers?

Once we have taken care of the basics of life, such as providing for shelter, food and clothing, I think we must participate. It was not that long ago that civil rights were established after much struggle and they're too precious to not be guarded by policy makers who have a stake in them.

Another barrier is the traditional expectation that women, and especially Korean women, are the primary caregivers, cooks and housekeepers. Unless a woman's family or husband participates and helps lighten the load, it is logistically very difficult to participate in civic life as well as earn a living and maintain a household. My husband is now the primary caregiver for

our 12-year-old son, and does many housekeeping chores.

As a public servant who is also sister in the Presbyterian faith community, what would you like to say to Korean American Presbyterian women in particular and to Presbyterian women in general?

I am sure my in-laws were not truly aware which church they helped found in Shoreline, now located in Edmonds, Washington, but I thank God I married into a PC(USA) family! God does provide. PC(USA) recognizes and models for us that there are no gender barriers in leadership positions. What a blessing that is to us and to our daughters! Our women leaders also are resources for our men.

We Korean American women are blessed with multi-generational cultural heritage where brains, effort, and studiousness were prized over brawn, might and ability to wield a sword. We can ably compete in the first category; the latter is harder for us. So praise God that we truly have access to equal rights and equal responsibilities to our God and country. 🍀

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