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Lely High School
Korea: Peace Studies

Annyeonghaseyo! Six weeks ago, I sat on a plane in San Francisco International Airport, ready to embark upon the journey of a lifetime through the Experiment in International Living. I was a nervous member of a diverse group of sixteen Experimenters that would absorb every aspect of a new culture, together. For the entire month of July, I traveled through bustling cities, mountain villages, and seaside towns of Korea and I loved *every* minute of it.



My time in Korea began and ended in the busy capital of Seoul. Immediately upon arrival, I was immersed in a safe, yet extensive, cultural experience. I learned to take off my shoes before entering homes and restaurants, as if I had been doing it my entire life. I began to crave white rice to eat with every kimchi-filled meal. Korean culture has developed its own very unique personality in the last few years and I was happily baptized into the world of K-Pop music, clothing, and television dramas. With help from our young Korean supporters, the group was quickly introduced to the latest social media trends. We spent days completing scavenger hunts around Seoul, discovering ancient palaces and the hottest patbingsu (milk shaved ice) spots. Korea and the United States are very similar and I was welcomed by every single person I met while traveling. However, there were some aspects of the Korean culture that made me think about some of the shameful and ignorant views that Americans hold. For example, Koreans are very appreciative of American veterans that helped them during the Korean War. There are multiple Korean organizations that host trips for foreign veterans, in order to recognize and honor them. At home, I don't think that Americans truly acknowledge the sacrifices that some of our global neighbors have made for us in times of war, as the Koreans do. We have so many selfless allies whose veterans often die without any gratitude from us. Hopefully, I can be a part of the generation that changes this sad status quo.



One of the most memorable parts of my trip to Korea was the homestay experience. Settled in the suburbs of Jeonju, my family's apartment quickly became a haven of joy and comfort for me. During the daytime, our Experiment group met and participated in local activities; such as, a traditional Bimbibap



cooking class, a trip to the famous Muju Taekwondo academy, and an afternoon in a Jimjilbang (Korean spa.) Our evenings, however, were enjoyed with our individual families. I was perfectly placed in a home with three younger siblings, two brothers and a sister. These little family members taught me to improve my patience, as any rowdy

siblings would. I spent many hours playing with my youngest brother on my iPod and watching my other siblings swim in their community lap pool. My eomma (mother) always made an effort to include me in shopping and fun activities, even though we sometimes struggled to communicate. After every dinner, my appa (father) and I



held long discussions on current global events. As his English was very advanced, my appa was able to help my understanding of the Korean election process, mandatory military service, and relationship with the United States. One of the most precious evenings I spent with my family was at a delicious Korean barbecue restaurant. We ate, talked, and laughed together for two and a half hours! Leaving my family was *extremely* difficult. My parents took our family to noraebang (karaoke) on the final night, and dressed me in traditional Hanbok. My parents wept and reminded me that I was their daughter and I must not forget them as they will always remember me. Luckily, we still communicate daily and I plan to return to them for the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

The group delved into the Peace Studies theme in every way. As we became acclimated to the Korean culture in Seoul, we ventured to the Demilitarized Zone that separates the two estranged sister nations. It was extremely difficult to see North Korea and to have the liberty to Google its history and post FaceBook pictures of it, knowing that the citizens of the country do not have the same opportunities. We spent three days in a Buddhist temple, where we observed strict vegetarianism and



learned to meditate. It was surreal to become aware of an unfamiliar religion in a quiet, tucked away area.



I have a newfound respect for Buddhism because I now understand that its followers *genuinely* desire inner peace and peace for those around them. During our stay in Gwangju, we learned about the democratic revolution that South Korean citizens held against their dictatorship government about twenty years ago. We literally

walked upon the ground that

held the bleeding bodies of

freedom fighters who had been wrongfully shot by their own military.

These experiences influenced my own concept of peace, especially

because there were many shootings and tragedies taking place in the

United States throughout the course of my trip. Peace is such an easy

thing to hypothetically discuss, but it is the hardest thing to practically incorporate into actual situations.

Although this is a hard reality, my experiences in Korea have encouraged me to relentlessly attempt to

instill peace and coexistence in my family, school, and community circles.



Before we returned home, our Experiment group had the opportunity to give back to the



community of Songjeong, Busan, alongside local high school

students. This specific community is rebuilding its tourist

economy by painting murals all over the town. With two of my

fellow Experimenters and three Korean students, I painted part of

the “sea section” of the mural. This experience was much more

than simply coloring in squids and whales. In addition to

beautifying the community, we helped raise awareness about

keeping the marine ecosystem of Songjeong clean. Fifty years ago, the Songjeong River was completely

polluted by industrial and civilian waste. It was a concerned citizen who eventually spoke up and made

change. After cleaning the river, this man installed an oyster habitat and huge stones around it that can be

used for watching the oysters thrive. By scrubbing these river observatory stones, we allowed local

students to continue learning about the importance of the river and keeping it alive.

This summer changed my entire life. Thanks to the support of the Naples Council on World

Affairs, I met lifelong friends; I was introduced to my wonderful host family; I bowed to a 500 year-old

Buddha statue; I played a traditional Korean drum; I climbed a mountain with a monk; I used a squatter

toilet; I ate way too much kimbap for my own good; I learned a K-Pop dance routine; I somehow navigated outrageously complicated Korean subway systems; I put peace into practice; and most importantly, I embraced the challenges of a completely new culture. This summer, I truly lived. Because of that, I have decided that my future needs to include more of the world around me. When I go to college, I will definitely participate in a study-abroad program and center my studies in law around a more global focus. While I may not pursue Korean in the future, I definitely see the great importance in bilingualism. Had I gone without this experience, I may never have gained this clarity about the direction my career or my life would take.

