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The Life of a Volunteer

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THE LIFE OF A
VOLUNTEER

FROM THE PHILIPPINES TO PUERTO RICO

Ye Lim Kim grew up as an only child in South Korea. Stereotypically, people expect an only child to be more spoiled than caring or to focus more on themselves than others. Ye Lim had a different story. Beginning at a very young age, her parents involved her in volunteer work. “They have showed incredible effort to foster my altruistic side ever since I was a baby,” she says.



Courtesy Ye Lim Kim



Courtesy Ye Lim Kim

▲ Top: Ye Lim with her parents.
 ▲ Bottom: Ye Lim sits with two young girls during her year-long stay in Ethiopia with her family.

Her first volunteer experience happened at the age of seven with a Korean volunteer association on a small island in the Philippines that, when translated from Korean, is known as “The Love Doctors.” Even as a child, Ye Lim fulfilled an important role in connecting with the local people. “People would approach me, giving me gifts and asking me questions,” she recalls, “sometimes with an attempt to pet my hair or affectionately pinch my nose. There were children, too. Driven by mutual curiosity, we became playmates during my stay on the island. It was sometimes these children’s affirmation toward our volunteer group that empowered the parents and neighbors to visit our medical facilities.”

Ye Lim’s volunteer work did not end there. After her parents saw how much this experience benefitted her, they sought to continue exposing her to service opportunities. Ye Lim and her parents have since participated in volunteer opportunities each year. They have gone to the Philippines, Mongolia and Kenya, and have done domestic volunteer work in Korea. “There was one time, 10 years ago, when our family had an opportunity to provide long-term service in Gimbe, Ethiopia, for a year. It was an inestimable experience, one that is still deeply cherished to this day. It was so long ago that it almost feels like a dream,” she reminisces.

Ultimately, Ye Lim’s background in volunteer work led to her current attendance at Andrews University and her decision to work within the field of cognitive science and psychology. “Attempting to understand the intricacy of the brain is challenging, but it’s a good kind of challenge,” she explains. The inventiveness of the field captivates her, and she enjoys discovering more about the mind’s functions and the possibilities for improvement.

Ye Lim also recognized that a college education would help her serve others better. “As I went on volunteer trips with my parents, I realized that a college education is extremely important. During the process of obtaining any kind of degree, you will realize that education is heavily linked toward being able to be of service to others. Formal education is the stepping-stone to widening one’s worldview,” she says. “Aiding another human being becomes less challenging if you

are exposed to different kinds of people and a variety of ideas during four years of college.”

This exposure is part of why Ye Lim came to Andrews University. She noted that Andrews is ranked in the number one position in campus ethnic diversity nationally, and has discovered that the Department of Behavioral Sciences, in particular, gives her an opportunity to meet new people and build relationships within a unique atmosphere.

“Our department is a delightful place. You can physically feel the warm whiff of mutual support and comradery once you enter the front door,” she says. “It is a safe and loving environment to touch unfamiliar concepts or express sociocultural theories.”

It was this environment that led Ye Lim on one of her most recent volunteer experiences with Andrews University in March 2018. Following the wake of Hurricane Maria, Melissa Ponce-Rodas, assistant professor of Psychology, and Harvey Burnett, chair of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and assistant professor of Psychology, actively tried to organize a volunteer mental health mission trip to Puerto Rico.

Ye Lim was in the department when Dr. Ponce-Rodas walked out of her office in an urgent attempt to find a student who could fill a spot from a last-minute cancellation. “At that moment, I felt as if everything was at the right place. Her announcement was like a last piece of a gear in a wristwatch, and the watch was finally ticking again,” says Ye Lim. “Every single plan I made for the upcoming spring break had failed by the most unanticipated variables, forcing me to spend the break in the residence hall. I quickly asked, ‘Can it be an undergraduate?’”

Shortly after this, Ye Lim found herself headed to Puerto Rico with an interdisciplinary group of 19 other students and staff from the departments of Behavioral Sciences and Social Work, the Community &

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International Development (CIDP) program, the PhD program in Counseling Psychology, the MA program in Clinical and Mental Health, and the Counseling & Testing Center. The goal of the trip was to educate as many as possible about mental health and how to cope with the aftermath of hurricanes Irma and Maria.

“I was worried because I didn’t know how to speak Spanish,” Ye Lim says when thinking about the trip. “The fact that there were so many people that needed help gave me courage. I have such bad public speaking anxiety, but it kind of disappeared when I was helping people.”

One of these examples of serving through public speaking was when Ye Lim shared her own personal trauma story. When she was 9, her school caught on fire. She shared how she and the other students had to watch their school burn. While they were all safe

and able to go back to their routine shortly afterwards, each student was required to go through several months of intervention. During this time, the students learned how to use fire extinguishers and evacuation techniques. They also were told that it is normal to be shocked and afraid.

While telling her story, Ye Lim emphasized how important these intervention techniques had been to her and how they helped give her a sense of power and erase her fear. Furthermore, she told the audience that she would not have been able to stand up front and tell them this story if she had not received that intervention.

“I assured the people in Puerto Rico that they are going through something that is much harsher than a burning building, and it is normal to feel unsafe and experience unusual emotional sensations in the long term,” Ye Lim explains.

During her talk, she noticed that several people in the audience were crying. After she finished, a young man came up to her and informed her that he was a firefighter trainee.

“He told me how things got harder after Hurricane Maria and how he was compelled to join gangs or sell drugs to earn a living. Instead, he decided to become a firefighter, and my speech was a reassurance of his decision,” says Ye Lim. “I was very touched by his earnestness. Little did he know, his saying that I was *his* reassurance was also reaffirming my decision to volunteer in Puerto Rico.”

Through the testimony of this young man, Ye Lim was able to see her story help someone open up about their own difficulties. In fact, Ye Lim explains that one of the most important things following a trauma is to help victims share their vulnerabilities. She decided to tell her story because of this realization.

Over the course of their 10-day trip, the team met over 1,000 people face-to-face and attended approximately 30 different events, including church services, group meetings and radio shows. “The trip vitalized and drained me at the same time. I feel like I am charged with all kinds of positivity,” she says.

In the end, Ye Lim did more than just serve others during this trip. Her own life was impacted as she continued her pattern of volunteer work and made a difference in the lives of those around her. “Helping other people can sometimes be hard, but it is never harder than being in a position where you need to be helped. Being a volunteer worker requires courage but going through hurricanes every year requires a whole lot more determination,” she says. “Despite the experience of life-threatening disasters, people in Puerto Rico showed strength, resilience and an undying spirit of optimism. I was deeply inspired — Puerto Rico left an imprint in my heart. My most heartfelt wish is for Puerto Ricans to fully recover. Puerto Rico *se levanta* (Puerto Rico will rise again).” ■

Hannah Gallant, IMC student writer

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