This is a Polaroid of my family back when I was in seventh grade at the annual Korean Parents Association Christmas Party.

The Korean Parents Association, commonly known as the KPA, is a group of Korean American parents in the place that I’m from, which is in the Tri-Valley, Bay Area, California, USA.

They basically serve as the united voice for the Korean American community.

When I was a high school sophomore, the KPA took on the task of implementing Korean language classes in local high schools. It was all hands on deck - everybody was expected to participate.

We kids were given the task of passing around petitions for other students to sign. My friends and I from other schools and I passed around petitions around our respective high schools, and our parents talked to the school board about why it’s important to have Korean language classes in our schools.

We learned that our other non-Korean friends signed the petition because they were our friends, but not necessarily because they agreed. They were doubtful about the success that the program would have.

“Korean’s not marketable.”
“Korean’s not popular.”
“We already have Chinese.”

We knew all these points were true, but we taught ourselves to not listen.

We also knew that not everyone could understand our immigrant parents on the first try. We taught ourselves to embrace their accents and idiomatic mix-ups. But what we learned was that not everyone was so willing to listen to them, least of all the school district.

My parents were always regretful that they couldn’t “help” me and my sister as much as they would’ve liked. English isn’t their first language, and they weren’t educated here in the United States.

From the time I was nine, I wrote emails to my sister’s teachers, my teachers under my parents’ names. I ordered pizza, and I edited my dad’s emails to important people at his work. That all being said, I like to think that their endless effort in this endeavor was their way of showing us love. And little do they know, their sacrifice in bringing me and my sister to the United States was “help” enough.
Oh, and here’s a picture of my sister and I by the Golden Gate Bridge our first day here in the United States.

My mom and dad were both first generation college students. They attended the same university four years apart, and both sets of my grandparents lived in South Korea during the Japanese occupation, and they weren’t even allowed to learn, speak, or use Korean freely.

The Korean language was something that they were taught to hold dear to their hearts because it was a privilege and not a right to speak and use it. My parents were taught to value language the same way when they were growing up, and as an extension, I was too, especially growing up here in the United States.

Growing up, my family and I spoke Korean in the household, and English was reserved for school and friends only. But sometimes, I feel like I would want to act out and I would ask my parents things in English or respond to them if they asked a question in Korean in English, and they wouldn’t do anything or respond until I said it back in Korean. So that was pretty obvious from when I was a very young girl that Korean was an important thing in my family.

Most folks in the KPA had similar backgrounds to my parents and I, so when you think about it, what an amazing thing it was that we were doing, and what a long way Koreans and Korean Americans have come.

The entire process of lobbying to get Korean as a language at the school was our - like our way of saying that now that we’ve owned back the language, we want to spread it everywhere.

In 2011, after two years of lobbying, petition signing, fundraising, and talking to people, I’m proud to say that my high school is the second in the Bay Area to offer Korean language classes.

My sister actually got to be a part of the first cohort, and today, the program is rapidly approaching its fifth year in session, with over five sections offered.

In fact, the program has been so successful that the last I’ve heard, they were thinking of taking to the College Board to create an AP option.

Who knows when that will become a reality, but I can’t wait to see where it goes.