

JinHee Darmer
Narrator

Insung Oh
Interviewer

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JinHee Darmer - **JD**
Insung Oh - **IO**

IO: This is an interview with JinHee Darmer at the Korean Association of Minnesota. It is January 10 2010.

Can you tell me your name?

JD: My name is JinHee Darmer.

IO: Can you, please, spell it?

JD: J-i-n-H-e-e D-a-r-m-e-r.

IO: Where were you born?

JD: I was born in Pusan, South Korea.

IO: When did you come to the U.S.?

JD: I came in May of 1974.

IO: Thank you. Can you tell me about the background story of your decision to come into the U.S.?

JD: I met my son (Sean)'s father in Pusan right after I graduated from high school in 1972. He left Korea in July 1972 and we pen-paled about two years. He asked me to come to America to marry him. So I came here in 1974, and we got married.

IO: Did you first come to Minnesota or another state?

JD: I came to Iowa first where my son's father has lived.

IO: There are many dreams for immigrants. What was your dream at that time, before leaving Korea for the U.S.?

JD: My dream was to marry a man that I fell in love by corresponding for two years, then go to college.

IO: You said your dream was to go to college, actually. Among Koreans, I think for many Korean immigrants, the priority is education for themselves or their children. What was the significance of education to your family or yourself?

JD: When I met my son's father, I was studying to go to college. Then, after I met him, I ignored to study. So I could not go to college. My mother was an elementary school teacher and she wanted I become a school teacher like her. Going to college and becoming something was something that I wanted to do when I came to America.

IO: What were your barriers, obstacles for you to realize your dream?

JD: I got pregnant right away after I got married. When my son was three years old, we got divorced. So I had to work to support myself and my son.

IO: What was your first job?

JD: My first job was working as a production worker at the 3M factory in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. I packed scrubbing sponges at the assembly line.

IO: How did you get paid?

JD: 3M paid pretty good for the time. I got paid seven dollars and something.

IO: Were you a full time worker? How many hours did you work?

JD: I was a full time worker, and I worked from ten o'clock at night to six o'clock in the morning, which they called the graveyard shift.

IO: Forty hours a week?

JD: Forty hours a week, sometimes more than forty hours a week.

IO: What was your job situation, workplace?

JD: Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, is a small town, about 5,000 population. It's a white people community. The plant employed about 500 something at the time. The only minorities were myself and one other Japanese man. At the time, that number just over Minnesota and the surrounding area had many Japanese refugees. Two minorities out of 500 employees, I felt like I'm out of place.

IO: What did you do at your workplace?

JD: My first job was packing sponges at the assembly line. It was very easy. You just packed sponges to boxes. I had several jobs. My last job before I quit working in Iowa was material handler. I supplied the materials to the line and stacked materials in high rise with fork lift truck. I, also, unloaded incoming materials and loaded outgoing materials, which are non-scratching soap pads into semi trucks.

IO: At your workplace, I think you have several, a lot of, positions. Did you feel, at that time, under qualified for your jobs?

JD: No, I did not feel I am under qualified at all, because I got a fork lift driving certificate. If I get certificate, there's no reason I could not drive a fork lift truck. I did not speak fluent English, but I spoke pretty well. Then, I had determination to show my coworkers that I could do as good or better jobs than they are. Korean saying: Small peppers are hotter than large peppers. I was a very, very tiny person at that time.

IO: Go on.

JD: In addition, my dream had become stronger going to college. When I worked at the factory, I felt, I felt discrimination because I was Asian woman, very small physically. Working at the factory made my dream stronger to go to college and become something with an education.

IO: Can you describe, at that time, how was your family life?

JD: I lived in a very small town, population about 1,500 people. I had a very isolated life in terms of socializing. There was no socialization among Koreans. There was no Korean church or Korean people that I could socialize [with]. I was very lonely for Korean people. Luckily, I had my son's grandparents to visit almost every weekend. They were so good to me. They treated me as their own daughter, even though I divorced their son.

IO: What were special difficulties for managing also family and work?

JD: It was difficult. It was very difficult being a single mother when there was no family of my own. However, my son's grandparents helped me a lot with my son and myself. When I needed someone to watch my son because of overtime work or I had to go someplace, they watched my son.

IO: How was your son's early life or what was his struggle as his early age?

JD: Well, he struggled being the only half Asian or half American in the whole community. He used to come home crying because the other kids worried him by calling names such as Gook or Chink or something like that.

IO: Was he struggling from any cultural differences at school or with neighbors?

JD: I don't think that he struggled with the cultural differences, because he was born here and raised here. But he struggled because he was only half Asian and he looked a little bit different from the other children.

IO: When did you move to Minnesota? What led to you moving to Minnesota?

JD: After my son graduated from high school, I quit working at 3M Company in PdC, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, after fifteen years of service. Then, I moved to Saint Paul to go back to school. I chose Saint Paul to go back to school because my second ex husband, then my fiancé, had to leave and had to work at 3M [in] Saint Paul.

IO: You worked at the same company, 3M, at a different state. Did you do the same work or different work?

JD: For the first fifteen years at 3M, I worked as a production worker. After I got my chemical engineering degree from the University of Minnesota, I worked as an engineer.

IO: Eventually, you got your dream to finish college. When did you finish your college?

JD: I finished my college when I was forty-seven. I got my degree in the year 2000.

IO: Did you work at 3M in Saint Paul while you were studying?

JD: I worked as a technician aide. I worked ten to twenty hours a week during school year, and I worked full time during summer vacation as a technician aide.

IO: What was the difference after finishing your college and before you finished your college?

JD: While I was going to college, I worked as a technician aide, tech aide. I graduated in May of 2000. Instead of quit working as a technician aide, I kept working as a tech aide because I wanted to do networking for my full time engineering job. Also, I really liked working at 3M. In September 2000, I got a job as process engineer at Saint Paul's Tape Plant. My dream came true in September 2000.

[break in the interview]

IO: Can you tell me the difference between after your college and before your college for your job description?

JD: Before getting my college degree, I worked as a production worker. The job consisted of, mainly, using your body, physical work. It was hard on my body. I hurt my back several times lifting heavy objects. I always had a problem with my wrists due to repetition work. I had tendonitis due to repetition movement. Sometimes, my neck hurt by looking down a lot. After I quit working and went to school, all those physical problems disappeared because I did not use my body. It made me realize more that I need

to get education so I work not using my body physically, rather than using body, using my brain or intelligence.

IO: How did you get paid after acquiring college degree? It was helpful to support your son?

JD: My pay was very good as a chemical engineer. The starting pay was, at the time, \$48,000. I was able to help my son with school work.

IO: How so?

JD: With the higher pay I was able to help my son with his education and, also, I was able to save money to go visit Korea or go to travel other places. Getting higher education, it was very hard to go to school at my age, but I had determination that I get education and become an engineer.

IO: Can you tell me about Minnesota life at your 3M workplace?

JD: Yes. It was a lot better because there was no obvious discrimination as I had encountered in PdC town. I encountered incidents where one of the employees told me, “Go back where you come from.” Discrimination was very obvious, I think because the town was not diversified at all. There was 99.9 percent Caucasian. When I got a job in Saint Paul 3M Company, the workplace was very ethnically diversified, we can call multicultural. There were engineers from India, China, Korea, so I felt a lot less discrimination and I felt that I belonged to the workplace—not out of place as I felt in the town of PdC.

IO: As a woman, what was the most difficult issue at the workplace?

JD: Well, in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, when I worked as a production worker, especially being a very petite Asian woman, they had doubts about my capability of doing heavy and dirty jobs. I found out later, for this particular job—it was spray booth operator; I was one of two female operators among thirty males—there was a bet to see if I could last more than two weeks. Well, I sure showed them. I lasted more than four years. When I got a job at the Saint Paul 3M as an engineer, as long as I do my projects and I finish my projects, they did not seem to care where I’m from or who I am as long as I do my job. I felt that difference between Saint Paul and Prairie du Chien is the production workers—this is just my opinion—were very prejudiced and a little bit ignorant, but when I worked at 3M in Saint Paul as an engineer, people were more open and diversified and less prejudiced against minorities.

IO: Can you tell me more about son’s education in America?

JD: In America, it’s a land of opportunities and a land of abundance. My son went to the University of Minnesota to study international business. He changed his mind to become a police officer, so he transferred to Metropolitan University, and he got a degree in

police enforcement. In Korea, once you get to college, you decide what you want to major, when you start your college year, you already know what your major is. Unlike Korea, America you go to two years of general requirement or electives; then you can decide your major. Transfer or changing majors is hard in Korea. But my son changed his major and transferred to Metropolitan University. He, finally, became a police officer for Minneapolis Police Department.

IO: How was your son's job? Was he satisfied with his job?

JD: Yes. He's very satisfied with his job. It's very hard to get in Minneapolis Police Department. There were so many applicants when he applied for the job. Once you're accepted, you have to go through a strenuous full month of training. Besides having a college education, you go through strenuous training to become a Minneapolis police officer. Before that, he worked as a realtor, and he was very, very successful at what he was doing. Then, he, also, was sales executive for Ceridian Company. Ceridian Company outsources and sells accounting software to companies, and he was number one salesperson in his district. But, he always interested in public service, and he never gave up becoming police officer. Finally, he was hired. I think he got hired because he never gave up and through his determination and persistence, he got in. He had applied several times before he finally [was] accepted. Now, he's doing his job very well, and he's very satisfied.

[break in the interview]

JD: I was proud of him and praise God for watching over him and providing him the right direction. When I was a single mother and raising him, I always prayed to God, "Watch over him and guide him to the right direction." God has watched and guided him to right direction.

IO: You went to college, eventually, at your forties. What was the significance for you as an immigrant? You realized that your dream came true, since your arrival to the U.S. What is the message for your family? Is there any advice to any Korean Americans or Korean American immigrants?

JD: If I had lived in Korea and tried to go to school at my age, especially being a single parent, I would not be able to have done completing my education. America is a land of opportunity. If you have a dream and never give up, you can achieve that dream. My parents and my brothers were proud of me. God has blessed me with so much and, now, I live a happy and joyous life. The significance that I would to tell Korean Americans is that if you do not give up and keep having hope, you can achieve that dream.

When I went to college at age forty-two, I, also, had a depression. I met a therapist once a week about four years. I, also, had marriage trouble at that time. My ex husband and I, also, saw marriage counselor, but in this country, you can do anything if you set your mind to it, even though you have depression or you have some hard issues in your marriage. I had all that kind of a problem, but I knew, then, I had to get my education.

That was the last resort that I had to do, so I was able to finish even though I had some problems with my life.

[break in the interview]

JD: As far as I know, most Korean immigrants emphasize very much on education, their education or children's education. I emphasize in this interview that we can achieve that education in America whether you are old or young, as long as you do not give up and you set your mind to it.

IO: Go ahead.

JD: I think that I set an example for my grandchildren, because they saw that their grandmother went to college at age of forty-two and got her degree in chemical engineering at age of forty-seven. They might not go to college right after...

[break in the interview]

JD: My grandchildren, Maya and Jodena, they may not feel like going to college right after high school, but, at least, they know they can go back to college when they want to—I don't know when it would be, thirties or forties—because they saw their grandmother has gone to college and finished the college at late forties.

IO: Your son got married to a Korean adoptee. I think we may categorize Korean adoptees and Korean immigrants always into like immigrants. Can you compare Korean adoptees to general immigrants?

JD: Yes, my son got married [to] Korean adoptee, Melissa, in 2005. We went to Korea to visit my family in 2006, and she found her birth family. Similarities were...

IO: I'm so sorry. I'm asking, actually, after her marriage to your son, what do you think about her? That means you tried to find out her birth family in Korea?

JD: Yes, we went to a family vacation in Korea. We happened to be in KBS, Korean Broadcasting System, in Seoul. It's called [sounds like Ah-chim-mah-dang] in Korean but a literal translation would be Morning Rounds[?]. Every Wednesday, the program is about finding missing families. By chance, she got to be in that program, and her aunt happened to see the program. She saw the story and she is like her niece. So she called her mother and the rest is history.

After my son married a Korean adoptee, I became very, very interested in Korean adoptees, and I started to teach Chosôn Camp where they teach Korean culture and language. I taught class for two years, at Chosôn Camp, Korean language and culture. I think that Korean adoptees have more difficulties than Korean immigrants because Korean adoptees, they have issues such as who are my real parents or where I come from? They struggle with their identities, but Korean immigrants, they know where they

come from or their identities. Also, difference is adoptees raised by American families and they are already assimilated in American culture. But Korean immigrants, they have to learn the language and adapt to American culture first. That's differences between Korean adoptees and Korean immigrants. I still think they both categorized as Korean immigrants, because they are Koreans.

IO: Thank you.

Can you tell me a little bit more about the heartfelt, emotional event that means she eventually married to a Korean immigrant here and she, eventually, found out her first family? Can you tell me more about the story?

JD: I will make a long story short. In 2006, my son, myself, my daughter-in-law, and my two granddaughters went to Pusan, Korea, to visit my family.

IO: Your hometown of Pusan?

JD: Yes, my hometown, Pusan. We did not have any intention to look for her birth family. We just went there for vacation to visit my family.

IO: Where was she born?

JD: She was born in Pusan...

IO: Oh, so your hometown?

JD: My hometown.

So while she was staying in Pusan, she wanted to go to her birthplace. My son and my son's friend who speaks fluent English went to her birth clinic and found out that the clinic was closed many years ago. On the way home in taxi, she was crying. The taxi driver asked why she is crying and crying to my son's friend, who is Korean. He explained what happened and the taxi driver told them that there is a program called Morning Rounds. Every Wednesday, the program is about finding missing families. So they went to KBS branch in Pusan, and they said the show is broadcast in Seoul main headquarter. The person there called the producer in Seoul. He told my son to come to Seoul next day for an interview. So my son and my son's friend and my daughter-in-law Melissa went to Seoul KBS and had an interview on Monday. Then, they got to be on the show.

IO: Nationally broadcast.

JD: Yes, KBS is nationally broadcasted on Wednesday. She was very fortunate, lucky, because the person who was supposed to be on the show was another Korean adoptee who teaches English in Seoul, and she can be on the show anytime. So producer put my daughter-in-law instead of her. The show was broadcasted, and I was their translator. My

son, myself, my daughter-in-law, and my two granddaughters was in the show nationally broadcasted in Korea. Her aunt who knows about Melissa's birth. There's only three people in the world know about Melissa: her aunt, her mother, and her father. Her mother is the one who took Melissa's mother to the clinic. Her aunt saw the program and called her mother. They watched Internet and her mother said, "Yes, that's my daughter." The station told Melissa, "Go to University Hospital. Leave some hair and blood for DNA [Deoxyribonucleic Acid] testing."

IO: Seoul National University?

JD: Yes. Seoul-dae ...

IO: Seoul National University Medical Hospital.

JD: Medical Center and left her blood and hair for DNA testing. We had to leave Korea on Monday, so we left Korea and came back to America. About ten days later, the KBS station called and told Melissa that they found her birth parents and the DNA matched. Ohhhh! What a joy and happiness for Melissa. So, we went back to Korea in November. That was October and we went back to Korea in November, again, to meet her birth family. KBS videotaped and broadcasted, also, families meeting together.

IO: In twenty-eight years? She was adopted in 1978?

JD: Yes, after twenty-eight years, she met her birth family and found out that she had six sisters and one brother.

IO: Yes, yes.

[break in the interview]

IO: In addition to your work, you got involved in many activities as a member of Korean [American] Women's Association in Minnesota. Can you tell me in detail about your activities in the community?

JD: Korean American Women's Association, the acronym is KAWA. KAWA members are involved closely with Korean Immigrant Association of Minnesota. We volunteer Festival of Nations sponsored by Korean Association throughout the four-day event. We volunteer [for] that event. We, also, volunteer at Korean Culture Camps, KCC, once a year.

IO: For Korean adoptees?

JD: Yes, Korean Culture Camp is for Korean adoptees. We provide Korean luncheon. This is good opportunities to promote Korean food and the Korean culture to American people. We, also, volunteer events that Korean Association holds throughout the year.

IO: Also, your member's activities, and got involved in the same situation like who are struggling in the dual culture in America. Can you tell me more about Korean KAWA Women's members?

JD: Our roles?

IO: Yes.

JD: Our roles as biracial families we have better or more opportunities promote or better public relations with Korean American people, because our spouses or our significant others, Americans other than Koreans, and their families are American. We are closely related to American families to promote Korean cultures and Korean foods. Also, we got involved in Korean American Women's Association, U.S.A.

IO: In Washington?

JD: In Washington, D.C. I attended a couple of meetings in Washington, D.C. We went to Rainbow House, which is shelters for Korean women who have mental disabilities, such as a depression or other mental diseases. The Rainbow House shelters teach them to be self sufficient. They teach them how to sew or they teach them how to cope with their depression. KAWA U.S.A. visited Rainbow House and donated money to support the Rainbow House.

IO: You talked about your community, your institution, Korean American Women's Association is so important. Can you tell me about this in relation to all the Korean immigration here in America?

JD: It's very important. Korean American women are pioneers of Korean immigrants in Minnesota

IO: Also, across the America?

JD: Yes, very close to American culture because our spouses are American. As everybody knows, during Korean War, a lot of American soldiers came and stayed in America and many soldiers married to Korean ladies and brought them here in America. That started Korean immigration. Those ladies who came here with their American husbands, they settled down in this land and many cities, and they learned. They worked very hard and they, finally settled down, and they brought their families to America. There are families and families. Pioneers of Korean immigrants here in America or Minnesota is not scholars, not students or anyone else, but these ladies married American soldiers during or after the Korean War. That's why this is very significant and important. Korean ladies who married to American soldiers were very significant and important roles in history of Korean American immigration.

IO: Thank you.

Your Korean American Women's Association actually has written an important chapter for its history in 2007 across the America and globally when Korean American Women's Association in Minnesota joined to the U.S. Federal Korean Women's Association. Why do you think this is important in the history of immigration?

JD: It is important because we joined the Korean American Women's Association USA and, then, American Women's Association USA joined with American Women's Association. Now, it's called KIMWA, Korean Interracially Married Women's Association.

IO: Actually, that institution was established in 2007. All globally scattered Korean immigrants from Italy, Germany, France, England, Taiwan, Philippines, Australia, including USA, you got together in Seoul mainland.

JD: Yes.

IO: What was happening there? What was the main theme of that first world institution, world organization that was established?

JD: The first themes or topics are promote Korean cultures and, then, reduce or eliminate discrimination against the interracially married Korean women and, also, help them or assist children of interracially married Korean Women's Association. That's the theme or topic of the first KIMWA meeting in Seoul. Since, then, since 2007, members have met in Seoul once a year to discuss and share success stories of their immigration, stories of countries that they settled in or immigrated.

IO: Thanks for your interview.