

What my three years' experience working with North Korean refugees taught me

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I recently learned that there are around one hundred and sixty refugees from North Korea living in my hometown, Hanam City. Once refugees are able to reach South Korea they go through a process of resettlement. They spend their first three months with the National Police Agency where they tell their stories and are vetted as genuine refugees. Next, they go to the Hana Foundation, a government agency for education to help them adjust to their new environment. This takes about four months.

After they graduate from the Hana Foundation, they are released into South Korean society, but as you can imagine, they still need lots of support. They receive a small stipend for a couple of years and are assigned an apartment to live in. I am aware that in the past, many were settled in the area between southwest Seoul and Suwon [34 kilometers (21 miles) south of Seoul]. I assumed that this was due to the availability of low-cost housing.

In the meantime, the city of Hanam, an eastern suburb of Seoul, has gone through a housing boom in the newly developed district known as Misa. Many thousands of housing units have been constructed and a percentage of them are designated for low income occupancy. Thus it is no surprise that Hana Foundation began placing North Korean refugees there two years ago.

The progressive, proactive mayor of Hanam, Kim Sang Ho, decided that it would be appropriate for the city to do something to support the refugees. He initiated the Hanam City North Korean Refugee Commission and asked me to join it.

On October 25, Mayor Kim convened the first meeting of the commission. Various local organizations sent representatives including the local refugee group, the Social Welfare Department, the Lifelong Learning Center, the Police Department, the Hanam Global Center, and others. They each gave proposals of what they could do to support the refugees. What follows is the talk that I gave at the meeting.

Experiences with North Koreans

Hello everyone. You may be surprised to see my foreign face at this table, but I do have more than three years' experience working with North Korean refugees and I would like to share my experience with you.

As a Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR) volunteer English teacher and speech coach, I have come to know more than twenty refugees. TNKR is an NGO founded six years ago by an American, Casey Lartigue, and a South Korean, Eun-koo Lee. They specialize in matching volunteer English teachers with North Korean refugees. The matched pairs meet, one on one, for a minimum of three months to study English. In addition, TNKR also has organized ten English Language Speech Contests for Refugees. I have coached and mentored four ladies in preparing and delivering their speeches.

I also learned a lot about the refugees and North Korean issues through TNKR public events with defectors and refugees -- former North Korea deputy ambassador to the United Kingdom, Young-ho Thae and Jin-sung Jang, favorite poet and propagandist under Kim Jong-il and author of a memoir, *Dear Leader*, among others, who have all been featured in TNKR forums. Refugee students have also spoken out about their lives in the North, their escapes and their hopes and dreams for their new lives.

Their thirst for development

One thing is clear, many refugees who want to be successful say they need English. Although there is some English education in North Korea, it is nowhere near as extensive as in the South. Many arrive in the South Korea at the ABC level.

One student talked about her job experience at a bakery. She got a simple job as a clerk but was baffled

by the names of many of the pastries, because, of course, they were all konglish words [Korean-English mixed] that she was completely unfamiliar with. She had to quit after half a day. Many refugees get a leg up in the university entrance process but often drop out because so much of the class work is in English and they struggle to keep up. Some also harbor ambitions to travel, study and even live abroad. They know they need English for this.

Here are some of the things I've learned: Approximately thirty-three thousand North Korean refugees are living in South Korea today. They all have a story and every story is unique but there are some common problems that many have encountered.

Their plight

The first is the sense of social isolation. One characteristic of almost all Koreans I have met in the more than twenty years I've lived here are their extensive networks of family, school, hometown, work and social connections. Koreans maintain these networks through daily, monthly and annual meetings. They rely on these connections to orient themselves in life.

On the other hand, many refugees arrive in South Korea knowing no one. Some, of course, come as family units or with connections to a church or other organization, but many others are thrown into this highly connected society to fend for themselves. Traditional family-oriented holidays like Chuseok and the Lunar New Year, when nearly everyone else streams off to hometowns to spend three days with loved ones, are the most difficult. Although they often get together and spend time with other refugees, it's not the same as being with their families during the holidays. Loneliness in everyday life is common.

In Korean society, one's connections pave the way to success. Introductions, recommendations, and advancement are usually based on family, school and social networks. Without such networks many barriers arise that seem insurmountable.

In not a few cases, refugees arrive with a lot of emotional baggage. Although they have made it to freedom, in order to do so, they had to leave family, relatives, friends and other loved ones behind. Often the regime in the North expresses their anger towards the traitors who escaped by punishing those left behind. Punishment can take the form of demotion to the lowest social class, deportation to a poorer rural area and even imprisonment.

Refugees are well aware of this and they can have guilty feelings over the difficulty they have inadvertently caused for their loved ones. At the same time, most also have a deep longing to see their hometowns and loved ones again. There is also the real and continuing possibility that they could be targeted for harm by the regime they have fled.

Women who flee North Korea

More than 70 percent of the refugees who reach South Korea are women. Due to their vulnerability, they often suffer abuse during their sojourn through China and other countries. Since China classifies them as economic migrants, not refugees, they have no legal protection and are often sold into the "skin trade" or as second wives to Chinese men. In order to survive, they have to do things that may scar them for life.

Those sold to Chinese men become trapped not only by violence and threats of violence but also they might conceive children that anchor them to some dark circumstances. Some have to leave these children behind in bad situations in order to flee to South Korea. There are a whole lot of guilty feelings, regrets, and self-recriminations there. In most cases they can't or don't want to reveal such things.

Barriers to assimilation

I've heard reports that refugees experience significant discrimination in South Korean society. Mr. Ken Eom, a TNKR student, was warned when the Hana Foundation released him into South Korean society, to be careful about his northern accent and what he revealed about himself. He tells the story about the time he applied for a job at a gas station. Because of his accent he was asked, "Where are you from, China?" "I'm from North Korea," he sheepishly replied. "We'll get back to you," he was told. Ten years later, with a master's degree in Media from Korea University, he is still waiting for that call, he says with a big grin.

He didn't finally overcome his shame and embarrassment over where he was born until he went to Canada to study English. There were students from many countries, including South Korea, in his ESL (English as a second language) class when he reluctantly revealed his birthplace. To his surprise everyone including the teacher were excited to know someone from such an exotic place. He became a star and learned the value of self-acceptance.

One people

I often ask North Korean people when I meet them, Are you North Korean, South Korean, or Korean? Usually this question catches them off-guard and they need to think about it before answering. In order to make one nation again, there are several key ingredients, land, sovereignty, and most importantly, people. After seventy years of separation, the Korean people have become strangers. The real work of making one united country is to bridge this gulf to becoming one people again.



As for me, I see beginning that work right here in Hanam as a great opportunity. The people born in North Korea who are our neighbors now are our greatest asset in that work. By reaching out to them, welcoming them, and making real human relationships with them, we will be doing the essential work of unification.

So then, how can the Hanam North Korean Refugees Commission best serve our new neighbors? We can use educational, social welfare and recreational programs to facilitate social networks between people. I would like to see small groups form where South Koreans can get together with our new neighbors for a cup of coffee and a piece of cake. We can erase many barriers through genuine connections between people. We can learn a lot by listening to folks.

I will end with a portion a speech at the tenth TNKR English Speech Contest by Yuna Jung:

We need to be proactive and approach them [South Korean people] first. We need to give them opportunities to meet North Koreans and adjust their thinking. Playing soccer together, singing together and talking together are natural ways to come to understand one another. We need to change their impression.

What do you think would happen if unification suddenly occurred? Our new, united Korean peninsula would become a very exciting country for generations to come. And we, born in the North and living in the South, can be the bridge. Through authentic personal relationships we can overcome the problems of preconceptions, ideological differences, and social economic issues. I can't help feeling that this is the work we have been born to do.