

Interview of Ken Owens -- Photographing the Course of Salvation

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September 2018

This interview took place in the Sun Hak History Committee's Photo-graphic Archives



Question: What was your experience in Vietnam?

I was a Navy radioman on the USS Preble. We were stationed mostly off North Vietnam but around Christmastime in 1972, our captain requested that we go down to the gun-line, the DMZ. He hadn't gotten his combat ribbon yet and you can't go from a commander to a captain without it. He volunteered us to go down. We stayed about a month and a half or two months. We got shot at and our ship was hit [by North Vietnamese artillery shells]. We were there for the last months of the war and were the last ship to get hit in the war. That's an interesting distinction.

I went home around late February to Hawaii, where my ship was stationed and about a month later, I went to San Francisco on leave to visit my family, my folks, and to see an old friend from high school who was then at University of California, Berkeley.

I lived in San Francisco for seven years. I did not see any members, no church, nothing. I went away, got some experience in war, started searching internally, went back to San Francisco and members were everywhere. While I was at Berkeley looking for my friend, I saw this group of

people with a sign that said "Unified Principles" on it, inviting students to a talk. I took their picture. Little did I know I would be with them within a week.

I went back to San Francisco and went to a library to get books and a girl from St. Louis stopped me. We went to Page Street, had a little lunch, had a little prayer. When she invited me to a talk, I walked out into the parking lot, trying to decide what to do. A voice came and said, You'd better check this thing out! It's going to change your life.



Question: How was it?

I went that night, little knowing that she, Carmela Acohido, was struggling but because I was there, she ran down the stairs and we listened to Papa san Choi's lecture [Choi Bong-choon, the first missionary to Japan]. I couldn't understand a word he said. We went into the big empty kitchen and she gave me very

simple lectures. It was basically what I was already thinking at the time. Later, we talked more and did some leafleting. They had a little church center on Eight Avenue on nearly the same block as where my grandmother lived.

I had to go back to my ship in Hawaii. I had two more years left in April of 1973. She and her spiritual sister are the spiritual children of Phyllis Kim, Peter Kim's wife. So when that sister Carmela graduated from the 120-day training, with Bruce Brown, they went to Hawaii, where she's originally from and found a place, a simple center. She then wrote me at the ship and I came over one night. She gave me a taco dinner and I moved in the next day. Then they gave me Principle and I joined.

It was very informal. Especially when Bruce and I were in the brothers' room for the final lecture: We were in our T-shirts, our cutoff jeans, in bare feet, sitting on the floor. He had his notes all over the floor. That's how I found out. I didn't have any problems. I was already in it.



Question: How did you get into photography to begin with?

My dad had a small camera and I used to take pictures at Christmas parties when I was about thirteen, fourteen, and then I bought a simple camera and two lenses when I got into the Navy. After our Vietnam tour, we all got combat pay, so when we went back to the Philippines, I had \$750, so I bought a Nikon F camera, which a friend of mine also had. I bought the same one; actually, it was a Nikon F2 with another lens. I had my name engraved on it. That was my first real camera.

After I got out of the Navy, I went to Barrytown for forty-day—one twenty, and then when I went to the Parents' Day celebration in 1975 at Belvedere, I met the photographers. They asked me, since I had a nice camera, to photograph someone speaking, giving a little testimony. Won Pil Kim was there, and he gave a speech. Years, later, it turned out that my photograph of him was on the cover of his famous book. That was my first cover, and I didn't even know until later.

Then, because I was there for training and eventually MFT [a mobile fundraising team] I let them use the camera, for safekeeping. I did four years of MFT and in 1980 they asked for me like crazy and I was able to get into New Future Photo in May 1980.

Question: How long did it take you to get used to aperture, ISO and shutter speed?

Ah, That's a good one! It took a while. It needs constant training, especially if you start with film. You realize why things are overexposed or underexposed. Trying to look through the viewfinder is one thing but trying to get the right exposure, I had to learn. It was on-the-job training. I was not too knowledgeable. I had the camera and the lenses and I was very trainable. That's what Robert Davis said. Little by little, I was able to learn more and more, so after a couple of years, I was able to go to the youth seminar, the world tour and of course did the conferences, helping mostly with the simple stuff, the overall pictures and gradually I learned from there.

Question: What was your most difficult photo shoot?

Emotionally or technically?

Question: Emotionally, I suppose.

Emotionally, one of them definitely was when I was here in Korea with True Parents on the VOC tour in late 1983. We were in the last of the cities, in Kwangju, and unbeknownst to us during the speech, Heung

Jin nim had had his accident. We all drove back to Seoul that night. They had already heard about it, but there was a special conference the next day at the Little Angels School, so they had to stay for that. Immediately after that was finished, they went straight to the airport and went back. They just told us he had been hurt badly in the crash. It was Un Jin nim's birthday, too.

They held a ceremony in Belvedere for him. Robert Davis took those pictures. It was a very small room. We thought that when Heung Jin nim was brought back to Korea for the Wonjeon Ceremony that True Parents went too. They had a simultaneous ceremony in Belvedere just to support it with prayer. Robert for some reason said, I can't do it. I'm busy. So he sent me. I went there in jeans and a suit jacket he gave me. There was no time. I had to catch the van that went there. And there were True Parents and most of the True Children, sitting there. Only Hyo Jin nim and Ye Jin nim went to Korea.

The girls of course were teary eyed. Mother was teary eyed. Father was holding it back, but through the lens, a very long telephoto lens, I could see him close up and there were sparkles in there. It was emotional, very deep. It was hard, actually.

The other time was when Father went to Danbury. I had to photograph not only while Father was eating his last meal before his speech, but for some reason, he said it was all right for members to stand behind him and pose while he was eating. I thought that was awkward but I took the pictures anyway.

Then True Parents went up and got ready to go and all the children were up there. I am sure they said a special prayer, good-bye. But then they asked me to go in and take a group picture. I had to actually go deep into the bathroom in order to get it wide enough so I could get the shot. Those were hard, the emotional times. At Father's Seonghwa Ceremony, I wasn't close, but Mother's face was puffy. She didn't have make up on. Those three were all emotionally hard.



Question: What about technically?

Let's see -- one or two. One of them is big events, like blessings at the arenas, stadiums, especially when I had also to go around the whole place and take overall photos. The other was the palace opening, because that was not one event, it was one, two, three four events starting in the morning. When you look at the palace you have these two wings on the left. On one, they had put ladders up the side of it so we could get up there and get more of a side shot. I did that twice. At the end of those four events, I barely was able to walk back to the bus. It was hard. Then, I had to work half the night because (of course) the leaders wanted pictures before I got on the plane the next morning. Another time, after a Blessing Ceremony and the usual huge banquet, I physically stopped. I ran out of gas. I was sick. I took a few pictures I think of Father speaking but then I just couldn't do it anymore.

Question: At what point did you go from film to digital?

Basically around 2001, during the fifty-state tour. Digital cameras were brand new toys then. I bought an Olympus, a simple one, and then within about three cities, I had to buy a newer, bigger model Olympus. I used both at the same time. I was relying more on digital as I went along. In about a year or so, with more speaking tours, I completely abandoned film. Once I got the nicer camera, I just focused on it.



Question: In the years that you were with True Parents, what changes did you see?

They got more intense. They became busier, especially Mother. She gave her first public speech in 1981 at the science conference [ICUS] at the Lotte Hotel. She spoke to the wives and some female participants. She wore a Korean dress and had a big smile. But after that, from 1992 with the Women's Federation inauguration speech she gave in the rain, Father gave her more responsibility and she went out throughout the rest of the 1990s and she's still doing it.

Question: What are you doing nowadays?

Photography-wise I don't do anything with the church now. When Father ascended, they paid my way here and I helped take pictures. I'm focusing more on veterans now. I'm with the veterans associations, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam veterans and Korean War veterans. When Dr. Pak brought two Korean War veterans groups on tours

here, I did both of those. I feel totally at home. I just feel more relaxed with veterans. I'm trying to help them out. They know what I'm doing and who I'm with.

Question: What are you doing here in Korea at this time?

After the History Department formed under Michael Mickler, Rev. Jenkins spoke about getting the photo archives digitized. Now that they are here, they became more serious about it. Graham Carmichael asked the committee to find a way to get me over to Korea. The committee talked to the Sun Hak Committee over here. They said, Yes!

I can only do it in summertime, because I'm a school bus driver. I arrived on July 11 and I work about six and a half days a week. I had tried to find everything and put it in alphabetical order. Some of the slides are organized and some are not. Most of them are duplicates anyway, so that's not essential. I have a spreadsheet, which Robert Davis' wife, Donna Davis, started in the mid-eighties. I had tried to keep it up and worked on it more. Since I've been here I am updating the spreadsheet.

Question: You said that some New Future Film material is still in the US.

Yes. We were surprised. They are from some of the major events in the 70s and other stuff. I realized they are not here. Yesterday I sent a three-page report to everybody -- what's here, what's not here, what I did. I sent it to the leaders here and to the History Committee in America. Many people know.

Another thing I did was make a video endorsement. My camera does video and I have a shotgun mike to go with it. I recorded for about three minutes, said what I'm doing and tried to inspire members to write their testimonies and experiences and save a copy for their descendants, because when I wrote my book, [*Memoirs of a Unification Church Photographer*], my daughter said, Why didn't you ever tell us these things?