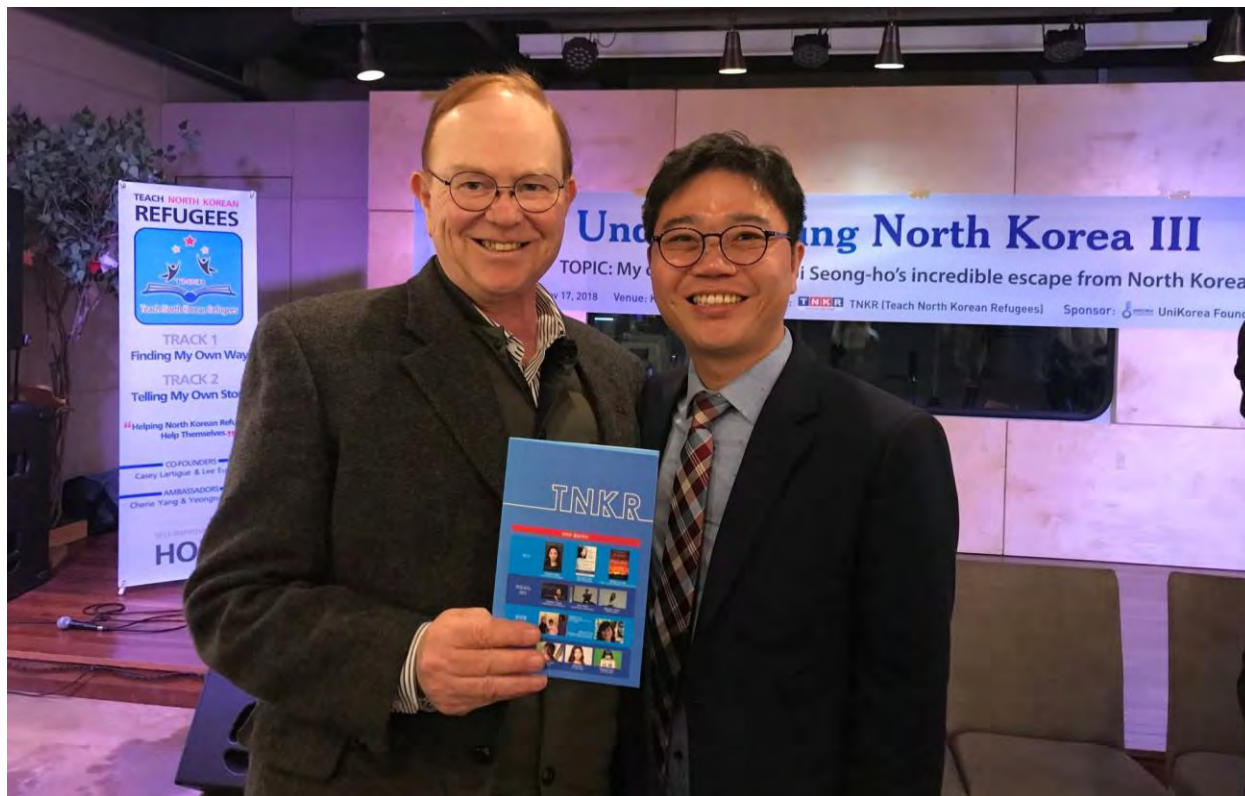


## My Crutches and Me - Ji Seong-ho's story

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Even if you don't recognize the name, you've surely seen his face. Ji Seong-ho's story of escaping from North Korea was reported to the Congress, the American people, and the world when President Donald Trump related his amazing story of courage and determination in his State of the Union Address. When asked to stand and be recognized, he stood and held up the crutches that he used to escape from the north, make his way through China, and reach freedom in South Korea.

On Saturday afternoon November, 17th, 2018 TNKR (Teach North Korean Refugees) sponsored him to tell his story again at its 3rd 'Understanding North Korea' event. Casey Lartigue, Co-founder of TNKR, introduced Mr. Ji by recounting TNKR's long relationship with Ji and his organisation, NAUH (Now Action and Human Rights).

When Mr. Ji took the stage, the first thing that was obvious was his big, warm, engaging smile. He introduced himself by saying he had arrived in South Korea in 2006 and was now studying for a masters degree in criminal law and procedures and was a human rights activist. Next he mentioned that 2018 has been a year of significant events for him. Most recently he was invited by the United States State Department to meet with officials and tell his story. He was accompanied by TNKR Co-founder Eunkoo Lee as he toured several states speaking to various government and educational groups.

Of course, earlier in the year he had been invited to the White House where he told his story directly to the president. It had been a great moment when he had stood up in front of a joint session of congress and held up his crutches. He realized at that moment that someday freedom will come to the people of North Korea and it reminded him of why he had become a human rights activist.

In 2010 he had given a speech on human rights in North Korea at a high school in Tucson Arizona. Although he spoke for only ten minutes, when he was done he noticed that many students and even teachers were in tears. When he received a standing ovation, it was himself who was surprised and moved. In North Korea, a standing ovation was reserved for the great leaders, the Kim family. At that time he traveled around America sharing about his life and other's lives in North Korea. He spoke at schools and churches and saw that folks regardless of race or circumstances were moved to tears. Many people commented that how can this go on in the 21st century. We have to take some action. He remembered that in WWII, many Jews were killed because good people remained silent. It is a sin to remain silent.

People in Tucson were so moved that they took to the streets in a demonstration where more than 500 people blocked traffic and chanted "Free North Korea Now!" At the demonstration he met a seven year old Korean boy and asked him why was he there? "Did your parents tell you about North Korea?" The boy replied, "no, I watched a documentary about starving kids in North Korea so I want to help them."

Ji reflected on his life and circumstances. He had forgotten about his life in North Korea and so remained silent. He felt a lot of shame for this. He realized that there are more guys just like him suffering back in the north and determined to take action, but how, with who and with what money?

He decided that it was important to tell the young people of South Korea. He began by calling all his friends and sharing his awareness and sense of shame about remaining silent. Everyone talks about reunification but we have to prepare now so when the liberation day comes we won't be ashamed in front of the North Korean people. Justice must prevail.

He started his effort with a few friends and only \$200. Surely more people would come to help. Their first activity was to stage street demonstrations. They made sign boards that they wore. One said "I am happy, on the front side. When they turned around, the flip side explained about real life in North Korea. Another sign read "I am a Korean woman." The other side told about the human trafficking of North Korean women in China. They hoped to raise awareness of the issues in South Korea. In the early days they had no money. Even on a very hot day when they wanted to buy water to drink, the book keeper said no. There is no money, just keep working. In the first year they had to hold their meetings in coffee shops without buying any coffee. They were real bold.

Eventually the \$200 became \$2,000 through donations. Then they had to decide how to use the money. Originally they thought it was best to use it to aid refugee children studying in schools in the south. Then one guy had a different idea. Let's use this money to save lives. Let's use it to rescue North Korean women in China. This way we can raise awareness of this issue. And so they did. The cost of rescuing one refugee was about \$2,000.

One of Ji's professors after learning about this activity gave him \$10,000 telling him to save five women. That year they were able to rescue twenty five women. The next year at Christmas time they visited churches and told the heartbreaking stories of the women trapped in China. Their goal was to raise \$100,000 to save fifty lives. They actually raised \$30,000 and were able to rescue fifteen souls. Through appearing on a TV program they saved fifty more. One refugee with a child born in China is donating what she can, \$5 a month. As of today they have brought 350 women to freedom in South Korea. Saving these lives is a step towards reunification.

Last year a group of former street kids who had survived on the streets of North Korea by begging and stealing, created a play in English about their lives. They were invited to America to tour around putting on their drama. They visited the grave of Otto Warmbier in Cincinnati Ohio, the young American who had been a prisoner in the north and had died mysteriously after being released and performed. After touring other locations, their final performance was in front of the White House. Six months later Ji got the invitation to meet the president.

Ji Seong-ho's story is not only dramatic but a compelling one. It's no wonder that President Trump chose to highlight it.

He was born in the far north of North Korea near the border with both China and Russia. It was also not far from the Hoeryong concentration camp. It was a coal producing region and was very cold in the winter. He hadn't chosen to be born there and neither did anyone else. Many of the people who lived and labored there were prisoners of war captured during the Korean war. Others were undesirables and Christians who had been expelled from other regions of the country. All had a daily quota of coal that had to be extracted from the mines in order to survive. All had a tragic story to tell. In spite of their real circumstances they were told they were the happiest people in the world to live in this worker's paradise with the great leaders to look after them.

Once in school he was given an assignment to write something on the topic 'sweat and blood' meaning hard, sincere work. He wrote about his father working in a factory with his blood rushing out. His father worked in a factory with no safety equipment or procedures. Workers were often maimed or killed on the job. It was exactly the wrong thing to say. He was severely reprimanded and told that saying such things could end up getting his whole family sent to a prison camp. He learned from a young age that you can't tell the truth. All the young people learned this and when these happy people began dying of starvation there was nothing to say.

In order to survive people had to turn to stealing. If they were caught they were shot in public. Among his most horrific memories is being forced to watch the public executions. He quit going to school because he couldn't study while starving. His own grandmother became a bag of skin and bones and died. Ji remembers his mother crying but he only thought about the two kilos of corn meal that someone had given them and how soon he could eat it.

In order to survive he and others began stealing coal from the transport trains. They could sell the scraps of coal in the market to buy food and survive another day. After awhile the coal mines stopped producing coal and the transports dried up. The nearby prison camp continued producing coal and also corn. While

the inmates starved the corn they harvested was shipped to the cities to feed the pigs. They stole from these trains. They avoided the day time but worked at it all night.

On the evening of March 7th, 1996 as Ji was preparing to go out his twelve year old sister insisted that she would go with him. He said no but she continued to insist and finally he relented and allowed her and his mother to tag along. It was a bitter cold night and he diligently worked to gather the coal that fell off of each train as it passed. For two hours he worked the trains. He was almost frozen and weak since he hadn't eaten in three days. Finally as the last train was departing it all went bad. All he remembers is that he was under the train in a fog of pain. He couldn't move and when he opened his eyes he saw his left leg on the rail. It had been severed. He also saw that three fingers of his left hand were gone. He was bleeding and dying. He called out for someone to help him but the other thieves ignored him and stepped over him to get to the coal. His sister heard his cries and came to his aid. When she saw his leg cut in two pieces and gushing blood she went into shock and couldn't move. Finally she found something to wrap the stump and tried to stop the bleeding. She called out to others to please help but there was little response. At last somebody brought a cart and loaded him on it to get him to a hospital. He had passed out. He came to in the hospital and his mother was there and also in shock over his condition. She begged the doctors to help him but they were reluctant. He had lost too much blood and would die. His mother begged and begged them to try even if her son would die in surgery. They gave in and began the three and a half hour procedure to patch him together. Of course there was no anesthesia. Medicines in North Korea were for the privileged who could afford them. They operated with saw to cut the bones and a knife to cut the tendons. He can still hear today these tools cutting his flesh. His father had been summoned and with his mother listened to him scream in agony for the three and a half hours. He wanted to pass out but the doctor slapped his face to keep him awake. When he awoke after the surgery he saw that they had cut off his hand at the wrist even though he knew there were just three fingers missing. In the end the doctors gave his father a black bag filled with the flesh and other body parts that had been amputated so they could be buried. All his father could say was this is what we get for a life of loyalty to the Communist Party.

Ji's recovery was hellish. There were no antibiotics so infection set in. The pain was enough to make him want to die. In addition as a cripple there was no way for him to survive. He returned to his life stealing coal to eat. He heard there was food in China and determined to go there. After earning money and buying a bag of rice he returned to feed his family. He was arrested, the police took his crutches and the rice. They tortured him more then the others who were arrested. He asked why and was told he was a cripple and shamed North Korea by showing himself to China. What a hellish country.

By 2006 his mother and sister had escaped to China but they had no contact with them. With his younger brother Ji tried to get out again. This time he came close to drowning in the Tumen River but they made it. In China, as a cripple, Ji was very conspicuous and people stared at them so the brothers seperated for the younger's sake. If it was God's will they would be reunited.

Ji's life in China as a cripple was exceedingly bitter. He felt abandoned by everyone. He determined that one day he would help other disabled people find justice. In time he made his escape through Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and on to South Korea. He was reunited with his brother in the south. After a while his mother and sister also made it to freedom. Only their father was left behind. They learned later that their father had been arrested while trying to escape and had been tortured to death. The body was thrown into the empty family home. Some neighbors buried him and paid their respects. This is the reality of life in North Korea.

His mother advised Mr. Ji to throw away that crutch and forget the past. He told her no, I came to freedom on this crutch and I'll keep it. His dream was fulfilled when he was fitted with a prosthetic hand and leg so he could walk again. Please help other North Koreans speak out for freedom.

Yeah, let's do that.