

A Tale of Two Cultures Koreans Lend Hand to Guatemalans

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The Record

December 7, 1998

Part 1 available in The Authentic Voice

In August 1998, The Record ran a two-part series about the experiences Korean and Guatemalan immigrants have had trying to assimilate in Palisades Park. This article is a follow-up to those experiences.

The Korean immigrants came with hot coffee and fresh bagels. But the Guatemalan immigrants waved them away.

The Koreans tried again and again, arriving at their church on Broad Avenue at the crack of dawn every Saturday to prepare dozens of cups of coffee and spread cream cheese on the bagels. Weeks passed before the Koreans, one of the region's most successful immigrant groups, achieved a breakthrough with the Guatemalan laborers, who stand daily on street corners in Palisades Park hoping contractors will pick them for a day of work.



A Palisades Park barber shop offers services to Koreans. (Photo: ABC News/ Nightline)

The turning point came when the Koreans brought along a Spanish-speaking member of their parish, the Korean Presbyterian Church. The translator repeated, in Spanish, the words of goodwill that his fellow parishioners futilely had tried to relay in English.

Now the Guatemalans warmly accept the coffee and bagels and shake the hands of friendship. Some of the Koreans have learned to say "hola" - hello in Spanish - which always brings a smile to the laborers.

Many of the Guatemalans, in turn, have learned to say "how are you?" and "thank you" in English. For the past two months, several Koreans have been studying Spanish at the church while younger Korean-Americans, who were born in the United States, teach English to the Guatemalans.

The growing bond between the two immigrant groups underscores how so many towns in North Jersey have changed. It is an alliance between two groups that have been - at different times - at the core of ethnic conflicts with Palisades Park's white residents. And

it is a most unlikely friendship between one of the borough's most influential immigrant groups and its most powerless.

"They're kind of isolated by language and their limited lifestyle," said associate pastor Eunhyeok Chung, 34, who spearheaded the outreach to Guatemalans this summer. "They didn't understand why we suddenly were there one day. And we were unable to tell them why at first."

"We're immigrants, we're settled, and we've achieved opportunities, thanks to, in a large way, earlier immigrant groups who paved the way," Chung said. "We feel indebted. We have to give back. We have to help immigrant groups that are going through struggles now."



The Rodeo Plaza illustrates the changing look of the neighborhood. (Photo: ABC News/ Nightline)

The Guatemalans, mostly undocumented men who have little contact with people other than contractors and one another, express a mix of gratitude and amazement over the Koreans' outreach. "Some of us are so poor we can't even afford coffee," said a day laborer who, like many others, declined to give his name for fear of deportation.

"It's hard to stand here on cold mornings like this not knowing if you'll get any work," he said on a recent blustery Saturday, as Chung and other parishioners greeted them and handed out warm bagels in brown lunch bags and coffee in foam cups.

"When they come with the bread and hot coffee, you feel someone acknowledges what you're doing to support your needy parents or children back in your country," said the 18-year-old laborer. "For the first time, people have light bulbs in our small village because of the money we've sent back. We look at the Koreans and we feel inspired to reach higher, work harder."

Attempts at communication between the two groups more often than not end in confusion and awkward pauses.

On a recent Monday, Kenny Oh tried to teach two Guatemalans the word "singer." But he wasn't getting through to the immigrants, who arrived in the United States about three months ago.

"Elvis Presley. You know, Elvis Presley," Oh exhorted. His students, who walk more than a mile from their apartments to attend the class, responded with vacant stares. In the most remote hinterlands of Guatemala, many have never heard "Blue Suede Shoes" or "Don't Be Cruel," Oh learned.

There is so much that separates the two groups. The Koreans are among the state's most affluent residents. The Guatemalans - many of whom never had electricity or telephones before arriving in the United States - are among the poorest. The Koreans are largely college-educated and hold professional jobs. Many of the Guatemalans left school before they were teenagers to help support their families.

Still, the groups have much in common.

The Korean parishioners realize that most of the day laborers are deeply religious. There also is the common experience of transplanting roots and finding their way in a new language and culture. On Nov. 23, many of the more recent Guatemalan immigrants celebrated their first Thanksgiving at the Korean church with turkeys, stuffing, and Korean dishes.

They also have the common experience of being the two newest immigrant groups in Palisades Park, a small working-class town that was predominantly white until 10 years ago. As such, both have had collisions with longtime residents.

Native-born borough residents resented the large groups of day laborers standing on the corners.

Many complained about them at council meetings and demonstrations. Eventually, the tensions shifted to the Koreans, because of issues including Korean-language store signs and legal battles over business hours.

Jason Kim, a school trustee who often has tried to broker peace between his compatriots and borough officials, echoed many Koreans when he expressed pride over the unlikely alliance with the laborers. "It's a marvelous thing that shows we have a heart and are trying to reach others," Kim said, referring to common criticism in town that Koreans are too insular. "It also shows that not only can Koreans look after themselves, but they want to help bring other people up the ranks."

Outside the Korean and Guatemalan communities, few in Palisades Park are aware of the bridge that the two groups have been building. Told of the budding alliance, many reacted with interest and praise.

"It seems like a very noble thing for the Koreans to do," Mayor Sandy Farber said. "Though I'd like to see more in the Korean community make efforts to learn English themselves, I very heartily commend the members of the church for teaching the laborers



Sushi takeout begins bright and early at a local business. (Photo: ABC News/Nightline)

English, which is extremely important to progressing in this country. That's a huge, huge plus."

Farber said he wouldn't be surprised if a few people - already uneasy about changing demographics - are less enthusiastic about the outreach. "Some might say, 'Don't do anything for laborers. Let them leave and go back where they came from.' But those are the bigots. This is a good, humane effort."

Local human rights activists, long concerned about the tensions in Palisades Park, also reacted with hope and interest.

"Here's an immigrant community with its own struggles and concerns to deal with, and it's committing itself to helping another deal with obstacles," said the Rev. Steve Giordano, president of the Bergen County Council of Churches and a member of the county Human Relations Commission. "This generous move serves as a great example to other groups and communities. And it can only be good for Palisades Park."

The Koreans admit to being pleasantly surprised by how their journey - full of rejection and awkwardness at first - is unfolding.

"At first, I distributed the coffee and bagels without any thinking, not much expectation," said Dongsoo Lee, 29. "One Saturday, I didn't go. But now, I have a real desire and need to see them every week. I can truly say I've grown to love them. We look different from each other, but we're brothers."

The Koreans have invited the Guatemalans to participate in their prayer circles on Sundays. Some go, although many have said they don't because they cannot understand the English-language prayers.

So the Koreans are planning to recruit a Spanish-speaking pastor and provide space for the laborers to worship at their church each week.

"Koreans have had difficulties in Palisades Park. There's been some problems," Chung said. "Every group has prejudice. Every group can do more to understand the other group. This is a small step, but it's a beginning to establish fellowship with other human beings."

Chung, who is studying Spanish to communicate better with the Guatemalans, conceded that there's still much he doesn't know about the laborers. But every Saturday morning and Monday night - when the two groups mingle over doughnuts after their language classes - he learns a little bit more.

"The more I learn, the more I admire them," he said. "We realized, for instance, that many of them rejected the bagels at first because they didn't want to be seen as charity

cases. They're proud of working hard, like we Koreans are, and like to earn what they get. They seemed to think we were treating them with pity.

"If you don't reach out and try to build a bridge, you'll never realize the special things in other human beings, and relations never improve."