

Testimony As Delivered In Re: New York City Council Resolution No. 417

Sam Yoon, President, Council of Korean Americans
Monday, November 24, 2014

I'd like to thank the members of the Committee and the New York City Council for the privilege and opportunity to testify before you today.

As a former City Councilor from the City of Boston I appreciate the role that a City Council can play in the life of a constituent community, like the Korean American community, to lift them up and celebrate their contributions to the life of a city.

My name is Sam Yoon, and I am the President and Executive Director of the Council of Korean Americans. We're based in Washington, DC. We're a nonpartisan, nonprofit membership organization whose mission is to be a strong clear voice for the Korean American community at the national level. We have 79 members across the country, including 8 here in New York. Each of our members is highly accomplished in their own right but also passionate about community, service, and leadership.

My testimony will offer three points about this resolution, which I fully support.

First of all, for the City of New York to recognize Korean American Day is important for our entire community, but it's especially important for people in my generation, whom we would call second-generation Korean Americans. First-generation Korean Americans, who were born and raised in Korea naturally have a stronger attachment to their Korean identity than those of us who were born here. The concern of organizations like mine is that we maintain that sense of ethnic pride and identity through successive generations, when it gets easier and easier to lose. We look to our Asian immigrant brothers and sisters in the Chinese and Japanese communities and see how they maintain that strong sense of identity by celebrating the history in America, just as much, if not more, than in their home country. Recognizing Korean American Day gives a younger generation, but all generations, a chance to affirm their dual identity as Koreans and as Americans. For my kids, for example, it says that we have a place, as immigrants, in the history and life of this country. And that's important.

Second, your recognition of Korean American Day is timely. As you may already know, Korean American Day was established in 2003 by Congress, on the one hundredth anniversary of the first Koreans arriving in Hawaii. However, within the past five years Korean American leadership has come into its own. First generation Korean American organizations have plowed the fields for us for decades. And successive generations like mine have benefitted. Here in the City of New York, in 2009, a record five Korean Americans ran for New York City Council. And two years ago, Ron Kim, whom we are incredibly proud of, became the first elected Korean American to

the New York state legislature. New Korean American organizations have flourished, with groups like the Korean American Community Foundation, holding some of the largest galas I have seen in the country. My organization, the Council of Korean Americans, was part of this very trend. We were founded just three years ago, by leaders from Washington, DC, Silicon Valley and New York, who recognized that our community needed a national network of leaders and a voice. So here we are. You've offered your resolution in the year 2014. But your timing is very good.

Finally, Korean American Day gives civically-minded Korean American organizations a chance to speak and to advocate on behalf of our communities. I noticed that in your resolution you congratulate the efforts of dedicated individuals for their "outstanding advocacy." Korean Americans, like their Asian brothers and sisters, are stereotyped as not being very vocal or loud. I can't tell you how many times people have said to me that they wished we had an Asian American Al Sharpton. That may or may not be a good thing in your eyes. But nevertheless Korean Americans do have advocates and they do have important causes. Some, like New York's Dong Suk Kim, call attention to universal human rights issues like the historical recognition of so-called "comfort women" during the Japanese occupation, and have done incredible work to bring that issue to light both locally and nationally. Others call attention to our broken immigration system, like one of my board members Hyepin Im, who sat in the Oval Office with President Obama to press him to take action on immigration reform, and DJ Yoon, who fasted for 22 days on Capitol Hill calling on Congress to pass an immigration bill. As we know, the President made a major address to the nation last Thursday outlining executive actions he is taking to temporarily fix a broken system that affects hundreds of thousands Koreans living in America.

I ask the New York City Council to recognize that among the Korean Americans living in your city are easily tens of thousands who are undocumented and qualify for relief under the President's plan. And I ask for your support on their behalf. They are members of our community; they are here in the United States and in New York for all the reasons that your resolution celebrates. This country, this city is a land of opportunity. It's a place where anyone who works hard enough can start a businesses, raise a family, find a cure for cancer, even serve in our military and fight for our freedom, as your resolution pointed out.

Thank you once again for recognizing Korean Americans, our accomplishments, and our history. Thanks also to Representative Grace Meng and Charlie Rangel for celebrating Korean American Day this past January. And thanks to this committee for holding this hearing.

I look forward to celebrating with you January 13 and am happy to answer any questions you may have.