

Joonkyu Baik - Colby College Korean Oral History Project Interview Transcript

Tyler Garvey: My name is Tyler Garvey. Today is Thursday, October 26th, 2023, and I'm interviewing my friend J.K. on the campus of Colby College for the Colby College Korean Oral History Project. Do you agree to grant the college permission to archive and publish this information for educational purposes?

Joonkyu Baik: Yeah.

TG: Nice. So, let's start off light. How have your first couple of months at Colby been?

JK: Fun, definitely. Not a lot of big adjustment socially from my high school, but academically, definitely different. But I kind of like it more here; more freedom, I feel like. So yeah, typical high school to college transition.

TG: So it was pretty similar from going from Govs [Governor's Academy] to here; the same atmosphere?

JK: Yep.

TG: How are you feeling going into the interview? Do you have any concerns? Any questions?

JK: No, I'm feeling great. I'm ready to just share my story, I'll say.

TG: Perfect. Can you give me a quick summary of yourself? Your name, where you were born, where you grew up and when you moved to the United States?

JK: My name is J.K. Baik, and then my Korean name is Joonkyu Baik. I was born in South Korea and then I grew up most of my life in South Korea. And then I went to the United States for high school when I was 16, so around 2020.

TG: All right. Can you talk to me about the first time you left Korea; tell me about what that was like, what made you travel to wherever you were; not specifically moving to the US, but your first time traveling out of Korea?

JK: I felt like when I was five, I think my parents really wanted to show my brothers the United States, so they went on a one-month travel, sort of like a trip all around the United States. And then my mom was so sympathetic, just leaving me behind; a three year old kid in

the house by myself. So she brought me, which was a pretty big decision, I feel like. So the first time I probably left was 2007 when I was three. I think I went to New York and Boston for a month.

TG: Nice. Do you remember any of that at all or not really?

JK: There's one fun story. Basically we lived in an apartment and there was a swimming pool for everyone, and then I was a young kid, so I couldn't go to the adult pools where it's deep. But I really wanted to just swim with my brothers. So I went in and then I almost—I almost like drowned and security guards saved me. [I] came out, went to the bench, and then my mom gave me chips, potato chips. And I definitely remember the flavor of it all because it's so good. I don't know why.

TG: Wow. Tell me about what it was like coming to the US. You came to start your sophomore year in high school. What was it like, that journey? What were your emotions like? Were you excited? Tell me about that.

JK: First of all, it was my decision to go to Govs, not my parents'. I don't know why—still, I don't know why—but I wanted to go to school in the United States. And then, it was during COVID. So it was very different from now. But still it was a big transition, and then I was definitely really nervous. I think that was the most nervous day of my life, that summer- I just didn't know what to do. I just wanted to get prepared for school and socially, too. So I was just... I was nervous, I'll say.

TG: I think we're going to get into it a little more later, but what caused your parents to want to send you abroad/to the US to study?

JK: So basically my brother went to Governor's Academy and he graduated 2018, and they really like the process there. And that they told me, like... Basically, what I heard from my mom is my dad thought that I'll not do good academically, and also school wise [in Korea]. Probably be better for my life to go to the United States for high school. And I went to international school, so it was predetermined that I'm going to go to college in the United States, so they wanted me to sort of get prepared before college.

TG: How did you go about navigating the cultural differences? Especially, you had been to the US a couple of times, but moving to the US, going to school, what were the cultural differences and changes, and how was it adapting to a new environment?

JK: Yeah, there's a lot of cultural differences, I feel like. Socially, a lot, culturally, a lot. The first year at my high school, I tried to go to as many events as possible and talk to as many people as I can so I can sort of learn, because basically living in the United States taught me a lot culturally. One episode is the first day of school. I didn't know I needed to wear slides to shower in the dorm shower, so I was figuring out—all my friends are wearing [slides]. God help me, I don't want leftover slides, so okay, so I need to wear slides, and I have so many stories [like] those, so I just need to learn really quick how people do stuff. I just copy them basically.

TG: Are there any major cultural differences that stand out to you? You're saying there's so many. Are there any in particular that you're like, "Wow, I didn't know they do this here like that," or whatever?

JK: Socially, I'll say, I don't know... culturally, I think most like 99% is so different, I feel like. Like how to talk to people, like being rude. I might look like a rude person just because... I do stuff in Korea, in United States, like... Eating too; it's really different, I feel like. But if I need to give one specific example, talking to people here, I just talk casually. I don't speak too loud. I talk really quietly, I'll say. And I really think my language choices, like word choices, like how do I present what I'm going to say here more than just say whatever I want to, because some people might find it rude and not nice. All right.

TG: Let's talk about your experience growing up in Korea. So tell me about hometown where you grew up—what the community was like, maybe what you miss, what you liked, disliked. [Let's] start with that.

JK: Well, first of all, Korea. I live in Seoul, which is the main city, the capital. It's really a big city. And then there's definitely pros and cons living in [the] city, but I feel like one thing I kind of disliked when I was there was, everyone knows each other because it's such a tight community and whatever place I go, I see my friend or I'm going to see someone who I know. And then, especially after going back after, during summer, when I go back, I definitely feel that... I feel like kind of driving everywhere, walking everywhere. It feels like nothing feels new. It's just city—kind of like, not a lot of characters in it, you know, just, just city. But what I like about it is it's just, it's so much [more] convenient than here. I can do a lot of stuff just by myself. I could just walk around and also the safety there. There's no guns or not a lot of crime rates. So I feel like definitely safety and convenience was a big plus in my hometown.

TG: So Seoul is a big city. You're saying when you go around you see your friends and people you know. Are you in kind of a suburb or a smaller community that was kind of a section of Seoul? Tell me about that.

JK: I live like 30 minutes away from the downtown-downtown, like where all the tall buildings are skyscrapers and where all the people imagine about, but basically when I go to a convenience store or when I go to market, my mom always sees someone who she knows in Seoul, even though it's like 30 minutes away from my hometown, in the city. And then my dad sees someone in a restaurant all the time - [it's] just a really tight community I feel like because people only go to the places they go and at the end it kind of intercepts, so I feel like, unlike [the] United States, there's a lot of options, a lot of things you can do. It's really tight and there's only few options in the city because it's the same location, same restaurants, same market. And also [if] one place gets famous, everyone goes there. It's more crazy. Imagine the entire community of Seoul goes to like one place just because they're really famous. It's like a big thing.

TG: Interesting. So the theme of this semester in the history department is play. So I'm interested in what you did for fun as a child. [We'll] start with sports or games or, what did you do with your friends for fun?

JK: I would say when I was young, I really liked biking. And then after that, and we moved - we lived in an apartment and we moved to a house through my, elementary school, like first grade. And after that I couldn't bike anymore because I wasn't around any park and stuff like that, but I biked a little and then, I played a lot of video games in my elementary school. I felt like most of the times after school I just played video games with my friends. Like 3 hours, 4 hours. Didn't get any work done, but it was still fun. And then I went to middle school and I started playing sports. I was really into basketball. I think if someone asked me what's my favorite sport to play, it's probably basketball. And then basically, what we did is play basketball all the time, and we went to a basketball court in Seoul. There's a few famous ones that we just played pickup basketball all the time. So as a child, I feel like mainly I probably played basketball and video games. Yeah.

TG: How did any of this change when you moved to the US? Did you continue playing basketball? Were there any card games or anything that you brought over from Seoul that you were kind of excited to show people or anything?

JK: Basically, when I was in South Korea, I didn't really play a lot of sports games. You know, I usually play like a FPS [First Person Shooter], like gun games like a Fortnite or stuff like that. But when I moved to [the] U.S., I learned how to play all different types of sports video games like NBA 2K, NHL or UFC, all those types of stuff. It was definitely a transition, but I feel like I like the sports video games more. And then for sports, basketball it was I feel like the first weekend with my friend. We went to the field house in high school. There was a lot of kids. We played 3v3 - it was a tournament. And then one team had two high school basketball players - like varsity players. And then I played with them. First layup I thought I

got it. Behind me, Ryan Rudnick, D1 player, University of Toronto right now, blocked me—without running shoes too. So after that, I was like, I'm never going to play basketball again in here, not even for fun. I thought about trying out; no. I wasn't good enough. I was too small. So basketball, I stopped playing seriously after I came here and then, I don't know. Sports; I really wanted to play sports at my high school, but my parents didn't really want me to, you know. I really wanted to play lacrosse because all my friends played, but my parents were worried about concussion, and then they prioritized like, “You got to do school better than...” Like they told me, “You need to keep up your grades and you're going to be so busy,” so they didn't really allow me to play any sports, honestly. But, if I could play basketball... If I could play sports, I'd probably play lacrosse. Oh, and then I wrestled a little for two years just because my brother did it. So my parents told me, your brother did it, so you can do it too. Okay, so I'm gonna wrestle, which was probably the biggest regret I've ever had in my life. It wasn't fun. And then it was just... It felt like a torture every day. Every day after class, I was just miserable. Every morning I couldn't wake up because my neck hurt so much. I needed to push myself. So yeah, a lot of things changed after I moved to the United States.

TG: What kinds of media or music or television did you watch growing up in Korea?

JK: Every Sunday for me, like when I was a kid, I watched all the real reality TV shows in Korea. Most [of them were shows that] people probably don't know here, but I watched a lot of those. And then, yeah. I basically watched a lot of cartoons in Korea. But music, I listened to Korean music, but even when I was in Korea, I listened to a lot of a hip hop songs from the United States, and I already knew all the pop songs. But the thing is, the thing I learned is—it was in my COOT [Colby Outdoor Orientation Trips] group—we talked about our childhood TV shows with my friends in COOT, and then, they could talk [about TV shows] but I had absolutely no idea what they were talking about. So I acted like “Yeah, yeah, I know. Yeah, it was so fun.” But definitely I feel like I don't know any childhood TV shows here, but I know a few famous ones here. Right now I watch a Netflix show, or I watch television here, so I know all the recent ones, but old ones, I have no idea. And [when they] refer to music, too. I don't know any music, like old pop songs or like the 1950 some classics, I have absolutely no idea, but still, I love those songs, so I just try to listen to them and learn them.

TG: What types of cartoons or reality shows... How would you describe them? What were they like? What genre were you into?

JK: For cartoons, I watched a lot of Japanese shows, basically, like Japanese-influenced TV shows, and for television, I would watch a lot of reality ones. It's kind of cringy, like comedy stuff. I watched a lot of those. It was basically a big thing in my home; Sunday night or Friday night, entire family, everyone in my family, just sits in front of [the] TV and watches shows and spend the night, still, yeah.

TG: Were there any shows or media in the US that when you got here, your friends are like “you haven't watched SpongeBob? You have to watch SpongeBob”. [Has] anything like that happened where your friends try to get you to watch the classics?

JK: Yeah, definitely happened a lot. It was a Saturday night, I told you. First time of moving in here was Covid, so everyone in the dorm couldn't go out during weekend, so the only thing we actually did was playing poker and then watching a movie every Saturday night. Every Saturday night we watched a movie together as a dorm because there was like ten people in the dorm, so it was really easy to pick a movie and watch it. So basically, *Godfather*, and a few others. I cannot name it, but I watched basically all of the classic movies my sophomore year every Saturday night because they wanted to watch it too. And I had absolutely no idea what those are, so it was really fun.

TG: Do you continue to watch a mix of Korean movies and US movies?

JK: Yeah, definitely. Especially, after like Netflix and those streaming sites became a big thing, I definitely watch. If there's a famous Korean show, I could watch it so easily here, and then American ones I just go to a cinema or a theater with my friends and just watch it, but I watch both of them. But most of the time I usually watch really famous ones, so both country's streams and both of them are in the theater, so not a lot of differences, but there's definitely some movies that I have absolutely no idea, even right now, and it's famous, and Korean people globally—like no one knows. I was so surprised about that because my first time going to Amazon Prime, US, I watched all the movies. I scroll through and there's so many movies I had absolutely no idea. But [in comparison to] Netflix, there's so much more movies that I know. So I feel like, famous ones most people know [I know], but let's say it was a less famous one, I have absolutely no idea.

TG: So you told me that growing up you would visit the US often. You said the first one was New York and Boston when you were three. From then until you moved to the US, what were some of the trips you would go on and what was the purpose? Is it to immerse you into the culture and language, or just a vacation or travel?

JK: I feel like the Boston and New York one was more about English and fluency because I went to kindergarten for one month; I had no idea how to speak. I had no idea how to speak English. There was one guy—my mom's friend's son—who I knew, but he was one year older than me, so the first time we went to kindergarten together, they separated us because of the grade. I think I still remember probably the worst thing that ever happened to me because I had absolutely no idea and all the people looked different and I was stuck there by myself. I feel like I did not even speak a single [word of] English there. For the first visit, I think it was because of

that. And then, after that, I went to Hawai'i a lot and then I went to the United States often—for my brother's graduation and just as a vacation. I think those are more mainly a vacation for fun. Nothing special.

TG: All right. Let's get into your education. So, what do you remember? What's memorable about your education growing up? What was it like in general?

JK: I wasn't really studying hard. I wasn't really a top academic student at the school—definitely in my elementary school and middle school. Basically, I wasn't really a big fan of the Korean education system, basically, but it was definitely a lot of transition from the Korean [education system] to the [education System] in the United States. That's like really different. And then I sort of... It's better the United States one, but I feel like it's not because of the system, maybe, or I felt like it was more about motivation, I feel like. I don't know. But still, there's a big difference.

TG: Did you attend private or public school?

JK: In South Korea, I attended a public elementary school for a month, and then I moved to private school, and then I went to public middle school again, for like a month. Then I went to international school—international middle school. I went there until ninth grade and I moved to the United States for high school. And then right now I'm in college here [at Colby College].

TG: So you talked about [how] you didn't really perform great in school, or you didn't give your full effort. Was there pressure from your parents to do well, or was it kind of relaxed/not as much?

JK: My parents didn't really care because they thought I was too young to do stuff. I think that was the main reason; because no one was actually pressuring me. But it was a really toxic environment, I would say, in Korean elementary school because there was like 30 people in one class. We just stayed in one class. We would take all of the classes in that class and we know each other, so we already know who's smart and not smart, so there is a lot of stereotypes. And then sometimes teachers tell you the rank too at the end of a midterm or final. One thing I clearly remember was I was like a thirteenth male and there's only fifteen kids, and then basically, kids who study really hard... Everyone knew and they really did hard, but there's stereotype, so I felt like I didn't really need to prove anything. I'm just a stupid kid, no one cares. And then I just didn't try. There's no motivation, first of all. And then second of all, I felt like I didn't know how to actually study stuff. There was not a lot of pressure, but no one really pushed me to do stuff, but the environment itself sort of moved me away from studying because everyone else is studying so hard, and then, they're comparing each other, and I didn't

really want to do that. I didn't want to go into that pressure and push myself into there because I felt like studying was - I basically wanted to do something for fun, and I didn't find studying or like, or something like math or like, I don't know, a language or English that interesting because everything was ranking and everyone studied for grades, I felt like. Not for general curiosity.

TG: Your older brother, was he the first person or the only person before you to study in the US?

JK: Yeah, in high school, yes. He was the first one who moved to [here], and then I'm the only one in my entire family who went after him. But, all of my cousins in my family went to school in the US, like college, and then, yeah. [I] basically sort of needed to go to the United States to study.

TG: Did your older brother have the same mindset about school as you, or did he care a bit more or study a bit more?

JK: He was like a starboy. He was like a poster child. He didn't try. That's the thing. He was just a smart kid, so he could get 100s on tests every test so easily, and he was like perfect. That did not even push me. I assumed he was just smart, and then he did so well in high school and middle school, and he went to a really good middle school in Korea. He went to a talented kids type of school in middle school. And then my parents wanted me to, but he didn't really do well there because everyone else is just the same, like I told you. Just focuses on grades and just such a toxic environment, so my parents told him you cannot. My brother didn't really like it, so he went to high school in the United States, but he was really, really the poster child. He was smart.

TG: Tell me about what it was like learning English. You said you attended an International School.

JK: Yeah.

TG: What year did you start and what was your school like? Was a full immersion? Tell me about that.

JK: It was definitely different. It was international school, but 90% of kids are Korean. When I'm not in class, all the kids there who, when they're talking to teachers, they only spoke English, and in social life everyone speaks Korean, so it didn't really help me to speak more English. And it was... Like the US education system in Korean school, like Korean kids. I

wrote essays in English. I would do everything academically in English, but everything socially, culturally; it's all Korean, so it was weird, definitely. I feel like it didn't really help me to do well in school. The system was different though, like grading system. Everyone sort of only studied for grades, but it was definitely different. No one told me the rank. All the same classes. Everyone's taking the same classes all together. Yeah, academically it was probably less challenging because I still vividly remember I got like fifties on math midterms in elementary school. I think the best I ever did was like seventy. And then in middle school I didn't even try, but I got like 80. It was more generous, I feel like. My effort was still the same.

TG: Would you say your older brother's experience in school and then going to Govs; did that kind of pave your path?

JK: Definitely. 100%. First thing I did was, I get placed to regular 10th grade classes like algebra two, and then I basically copied his entire schedule. I told them, "I'm not going to take this class because my brother didn't take this class." That's what I basically told my parents. They didn't really like that because they knew my brother was like really smart and I wasn't, so I just copied everything. I took Latin because of him. I took Pre-Calc and then... I basically copied him everywhere. He did newspaper so I did newspaper. He did wrestling, so I needed to do wrestling. So it was the same thing, but definitely I wasn't better than him, yeah.

TG: All right, let's talk about what the culture at Govs was like. What was it like being at a predominantly white school, and how did that kind of shape your experience?

JK: As I told you, I went to middle school, but it was mostly Korean, not a lot of international kids, but United [States] system. So it was definitely different socially, and basically, [it was the] first time in my life that I was being the minority basically, but I felt like Govs was like a really nice community. Everyone was nice. Everyone really... There was not a lot of people who was actually mean to me. I felt like there was only like two kids who was mean to me, but they were mean to everyone else too. I felt like it wasn't racially motivated, but everyone was curious about me because they probably, for some of them, the first time seeing someone who came from South Korea, but they asked me a lot of questions, I felt like. But generally, they were really nice to me, so I never felt like someone's like *ehh*, yeah. It was not that bad.

TG: This kind of goes along with it, but do you feel like the way you experienced high school as a minority gave you a different experience than any of the other kids, or like the non... Or like the white kids? How do you feel like your experience was different, if at all?

JK: Oh, yeah, makes sense. So basically, that was the first time for me being minority as a person, not racially or anything, because I was living in South Korea, and I came to the United States and then... I don't know, I just like... What is it called? It's like a minority mindset. I

don't know. There's something called like a sort of need to not make mistakes or try to not bother anyone else. I definitely had that for quite a... I don't know. Still now, I just try to be nice. I'm not trying to be mean to anyone or... I'm trying to be nice. I felt like, yeah, definitely being a minority taught me a lot. But I don't mind being a minority, you know. Basically, when you say white, the majority of my high school was nice, but I didn't really want to go to a party because they didn't really think of me as a person who would go to the party or do something for fun. [They assume that] I don't do anything, [that] I don't do any drugs, or vape, they generally assume I don't do it, which I don't care, but I don't do it, so they don't care. And then some of the kids think [that because] I don't really speak in class, I'm really quiet. And then they just assume that... Some people assume that I don't have any characteristics, but yeah. Oh, and then it is definitely harder to make friends as a minority than as a white kid, I feel like, just because of the first interaction, but after you talk to them enough they know I'm the same as most people. I'm just nice and I'm just like a typical high school kid. But that really helped me a lot in Covid because no one knew each other, so everyone—like ten people to a dorm—imagine everyone needs to talk to each other and everyone needs to go to the dining together because all of them are new and they have absolutely no idea, so. After talking to them, they became friends and it was a chain reaction. It was so much easier to be friends with them after [we met], but the first time it was [difficult]. And then there's one really good kid, Danny Webster, who taught me a lot socially. He was a really nice kid. [We] still keep in touch. He taught me basically everything. He told me, if I say something awkward or it doesn't make sense, he just told me not to do it, and then... He just taught me everything. That friend really helped me to learn the social and cultural life skills. He helped me a lot. As a minority, there's stuff that I didn't know, and he taught me all of those stuff.

TG: Looping back... So he was helpful in you adapting to the US culture and learning about it, learning new things, correcting what might be appropriate in Korea that is different here?

JK: Yeah.

TG: Were there any experiences or moments from Korea that you would say kind of shaped your identity, or... Anything major, I guess, that changed the way you behave in the US? It's kind of a tough one.

JK: For me, I don't know. I feel like... Can you repeat the question?

TG: Were there any parts of your identity or culture from Korea that you brought over to the US for high school? If not, that's okay. Feel free to think about it now.

JK: No, not academically, because I actually started trying studying academics after I came to high school, so, I don't know. Identity... Oh! Being clean. I feel like my grandfather, my dad always taught me that your room needs to be really clean. I always need to smell good and dress well, and all of those basic attitudes. They always taught me when I was young that you need to do that. Oh, and then smell-wise—how I smell, too. My grandfather, he's a businessman, so he came to the United States when no one was coming because he needed to export goods and stuff. Basically, he told me crazy stories back then, but one thing he told me; you got to dress well and have a good attitude and smell well, all those stuff. Because as a sort of foreigner and immigrant, he was like... He can tell basically. And then I think he told me... My dad told me, I think, one time and then he told me, "You don't know how you smell unless you're in an elevator full of white people." You can smell how you smell because you smell so different. So that's one thing that really brought me here. At Govs or here, I try to make my room clean all the time, smell good, and then, I don't know, I try to do basic hygiene stuff all the time because that's what my grandparents and parents taught me. And then I'll probably have it my entire life because it's good for me and good for others.

TG: Awesome. So let's jump into your family a bit. You said for you, it was kind of expected that you would go to school in the US. Was it the same for your older brother because he was the first person to study in the US, right?

JK: Yeah, basically one of my oldest cousins who was like 12 years older than me - she went to school in the United States for university. But basically what happened was, my parents knew how toxic it was and they didn't really want me to get through all those crazy exams. Basically, in Korea you did take one exam before going to college and that exam is like SAT but with all the AP exams. Basically it's easier to explain; you take SAT and AP Chem and AP physics at the same day, straight, not leaving the room. That test determines everything and you only have one chance every year. So if you don't do well on the test, you need to repeat it, study for one year, and then do it again. And then my parents really didn't want me to do that. And then my dad sort of struggled... Not struggled, but my dad didn't like academics when he was in high school and college, so I think it was more like my aunt's decision, who said "I'm going to send my kid to the United States for college." So my cousin went to international school, so that's how it happened. And then after she went, everyone sort of followed, my cousin. So for me the only thing that was different was going to boarding school, because everyone else just went to international school in Korea and went to college, but my cousin and basically my brother thought going to boarding school will prepare you for college better so you could sort of enjoy college life. That's what basically my parents thought it was, so.

TG: Nice. you go back to Korea every so often, you said, to visit your parents, grandparents. I think you said you went back this summer. What is it like for you when you're visiting? Is it...

Are you excited to be back in your hometown, see old friends, see family? Tell me about your visits back and maybe how often you go.

JK: I go every winter and summer, basically, because they want me to. But I don't know for right now, because when I was in high school, there was nowhere for me to stay during winter and in summer. But I don't know - during college, I don't know. But first day coming back, airport, just everything feels so new and different when I come back first day. But like, second day and the week after, I feel so natural and then, I don't know, it feels different, but I still feel same there. It's just Korea and then it's just Seoul and I don't feel anything awkward. I just feel so natural in it.

TG: What are your emotions like when you have to leave? Are you sad to leave your family or excited to get back to the US and get back to school?

JK: I feel like... Summer, I'm ready to go back to the United States because I need to stay there for like three months or more. But winter, I definitely want to stay a little bit longer. My grandparents really want me to stay longer. My parents and me and my parents had a long discussion about Jan-Plan in year because they told me if there's any way, if you can stay in Korea, that will be the thing that they will support, but I told them I couldn't get an internship, so I cannot take classes in different university as a freshman, so I am coming back. So they were really sad about it. But for me, I feel like winter all the time, I kind of wish I stay a bit longer because it's so short. Summer—the thing is, like, it really depends on weather. The summer in Korea is possibly the worst summer weather. Like the weather there... The weather this year was crazy because there was like, you know monsoon; it's a weather pattern and that it rains for one month straight and it's just so humid and so it's just kind of not the best. And then after that it gets really, really hot. So, yeah, but I like to go back sometimes. Like weekends I want to go back but it's too expensive first of all, and then for two days it's not worth it, so yeah.

TG: Tell me about your family. How many siblings do you have in your household growing up, and what was your family like? How did you fit in?

JK: I have two older brothers and then I have parents - both of them. They're living together, so, yeah, but we, like, in Korea, I feel like one thing that's really different is family is really important, you know. Not a lot of people get divorced, basically, and then they try to keep their family as strong as possible. And then for us, same thing. My parents are really nice. And then my brothers, both of them... When I was younger when all of us stayed together, when my brother, like older brother, hadn't left school for the United States, I think that was the most fun time of my life. Basically, we just did everything together. We would watch TV shows. We ate out. It was like a typical, like, family-family, I feel like. Good family.

TG: You kind of already answered this, but if you have anything to add about your role in your household. Specifically, when all your brothers were there, you were the youngest sibling.

JK: I'm like a typical youngest one, I feel like. I pissed them off. Parents come, I cry. They're the one who's getting accused of. They get all the hard part and they just take care of me. And then I feel like my older brother's always telling me that Dad loves me the most and parents loves me the most. When I was young and I could get away with a lot of stuff that I did wrong. I feel like that's the main reason why I didn't really try in elementary school and all of my brothers did. And then, yeah, definitely a factor. Yeah. And then even my brother thinks I'm like... My first older brother, who was like six years older than me, thinks I'm his little kid. He doesn't even treat me like a - even if I do something crazy on him, he doesn't care. He thinks just like a little cute brother. And then, me and my second older brother fought a lot in middle school.

[Interruption]

Yeah, I was a little kid, and then they didn't really care what I would do. But I definitely learned a lot from my brothers. Like, a thing about me is, I basically copied all the stuff they did and tried to do [it] better. Yeah, that's basically what I did.

TG: Did you grow up with any religious or other organizational ties in your family?

JK: Yeah, my grandparents are Christians, my parents are Christians, and basically my entire family is Christian, so every Sunday we go to church all together and then after that we just grab a lunch, quick lunch all together, so my entire family is really close. I'm real close with cousins. I feel like this Thanksgiving I'm going to New York to see my cousin. Yeah, but back to the religious part. Yep. I am Christian I will say but I'm not like religious-religious, but my family is Christian, so I naturally became one. I believe in it, but in the United States, I just never went to church, but I still believe in it.

TG: Was church a very social gathering for your family? Like you said, "extended family; we all go to see each other." That was a big factor of it?

JK: Yeah, big factor. Yeah. When all of us came back from summer and then basically we all see each other and we just talk about everything and then, yeah.

TG: So I want to dig into a bit about your family's history. Why don't you start with what your parents' experience growing up in Korea was. You said that your dad didn't really like the school system?

JK: No, it's just because, like, he basically... I told you about the exam. He needed to repeat once because the day he had gone to take the exam, it was snowing a lot. He was one minute or two minutes close to miss the tests entirely and that messed him around mentally a lot, so he couldn't do well in the test, so after that he did well so he went to good college, but it was actually my parents didn't really hate going there, but after they have a child, like twenty years past, or like ten years past, the system is still the same. They didn't really want to imagine their kids going through that, so they just didn't really follow it and tried to give us like the best opportunity, which is very nice. That's why I feel like I went to private school, you know, and all my brothers did too, so yeah.

TG: What was it like socially for your parents? Have they talked about any stories about their childhood that, like, has affected you or [do you have] any favorite stories about your parents growing up or anything like that that stands out to you?

JK: My mom used to play cello and she went to college for cello too, she majored in, I don't know, something related to music, but it was a big thing for her, but she didn't really want to do it, but her mom forced her - my grandparents sort of forced her to do it, so she didn't really like it and she needed to do it. And then basically she told me a story. She sort of sneaked out the lesson when the teacher went to the bathroom and had a break. She sneaked out of the window and went to go out. I feel like that's the one reason why my parents didn't really want to push me to do stuff; because they were being forced to when they were young, I feel like.

TG: Would you say they had a lot greater of an influence from their parents to do well in school than you had maybe?

JK: Yeah, definitely. Because my grandparents didn't go to university or college, so I feel like it was a bit complex. And then my grandparents for my dad's side, was a teacher, so my dad and uncle academically didn't do well because, sort of like my grandfather, had it complex academically. And so my grandparents were teachers, so she knew how to teach kids, so academically they always need to be good. Yeah, I think my dad didn't really tell me like a specific story. I don't know why, but I heard he cheated all the time. He always needed to study. Academically they were really rigorously forced to study.

TG: Same question, but for your grandparents; are you close with them? Do you visit them when you visit Korea? And do you have any stories from them growing up or their childhood, or any stories with them from you growing up?

JK: I'm really close with them. I talk to them all the time. My grandparents FaceTime me sometimes, at random like 3:00AM, and I need to answer it because of the time difference.

But the one good story is: my [grandfather] thinks I'm the most similar kid to him. Like he thinks I'm exactly the same person as him, so he loves me a lot and then he always loves to feed kids. Every time I go back, I gain like a five pounds all the time. They give me a crazy amount of food and then... The funny thing is, though, my grandpa—if I don't eat as much as possible, he's kind of disappointed, and he shows me that like... I'm so confused. Do I need to impress you? I'm not like a food fighter. I think it's because he went through—both of them went through—war, like Korean War. So I feel like that's a big thing; feeding family. That's one thing they really enjoy, I feel like.

TG: Have they talked to you about their experience through the Korean War at all?

JK: All the time.

TG: Tell me about that.

JK: Basically, my grandparents, my grandfather, was living in North Korea and moved out to China. So my grandfather was actually born in China because... Japanese invasion, I think. Then he moved back to North Korea after that. But right after that there was a war, so basically he grew up like a... He was doing little tedious work. My grandparents' parents told him to do stuff, like grab a little snack to his uncle, and then while he was doing that, he was in a wrong boat and he came down to South Korea by himself. And then after that, he did all the stuff. He survived everything by himself, so he was a war orphan, but he figured [it] out. And then my grandmother—she didn't really have a typical story. She didn't really tell me, but I feel like, she lived in the place where we're living right now when she was young, and then her dad was a police and then she went through the same thing, all the stuff. Yeah. And then fun story, still. My grandmother from my mom's side, when she was really young, all her like parents told her to bring gold and all the precious stuff because of the Korean War, so they needed to move, but my grandmother didn't like it, so she threw it away; all the gold and diamonds and stuff, and she put her toys in it. So she got really scolded and all this stuff when she was young. All my grandparents went through war, and then I feel like my grandfather from my dad's side had the craziest story because he moved down to South Korea by himself and then he did all the stuff.

TG: How has learning about your family's and maybe, especially your grandfather's experience growing up in Korea; how has that shaped your experience or childhood growing up in Korea, if at all?

JK: I don't know. I feel like I've been predominantly... I feel like I'm living the same lifestyle as them. I'm not trying to copy [but] that's what I see and learn all my life, and then I kind of

want to do that same thing. I feel like that's pretty good, and then for me, if I could live like that, I would do definitely do that. Just work and then it'd be nice to come back home and have a family and then eat dinner peacefully. Nothing crazy, but I'll definitely want to live the same lifestyle.

TG: After Colby, what do you see as the future for you? Do you see yourself going back to Korea, staying in the US for work? And also if you want to get into what your siblings are doing.

JK: Depends. For me, I kind of want to stay here for two to three years just working because... I don't know why, but I want to definitely experience it, you know, just working in the United States. And then after that, I don't know. I kind of want to go to grad school or stuff like that, but after all those, I probably want to go back to South Korea, but I feel like, I don't know, I want to kind of live the lifestyle of come to Korea and then go to the United States, you know, like move around a little often. But yeah, I feel like my home. I feel like, will be South Korea. I'll have like a house and home, but working I feel like I don't know yet.

TG: Do your parents plan on always staying in Korea? Do they speak fluent English?

JK: My mom is learning. After I went to college, she said, no one's in home, so I'm going to do stuff. She said "I'm going to learn English". But she was kind of frustrated coming to the United States, because she came a few times for family weekends and she wasn't really able to talk clearly. And then my dad knows how to speak English, like business-wise. He's not fluent socially, but he knows how to speak basic things - he could survive in the U.S. by himself.

TG: What about your brothers? What are they doing right now, after graduating?

JK: My oldest brother, he had an internship, so many internships in college, and then he went to the army, so he's done with all of that. I assume he's coming back to South Korea to work. I don't know, but that's what it seems like the plan is for him. I don't know about my second brother. He's still can't figure it out, I feel like. He's a junior, so he's trying to get an internship, but he told me it's really hard to get one nowadays, so.

TG: And where is he at school?

JK: Emory University.

TG: All right. For my final question, looking back at your life journey, is there any part or parts that has meant the most to you that's most memorable - like the steps to success in your life?

JK: I feel like the summer before coming to the United States. First time. That three months, I feel like I was just so nervous and I didn't know what to do, so I just tried my best. And then academically, I told you I didn't study at all in middle school and trying to catch up with my first brother, who was really, really smart. That process taught me really a lot of stuff. And then probably my high school - basically my high school career did teach me a lot because I had the one transition and then adapting to new school and then learning from there - I think it was definitely life changing for me.

TG: How would you compare the transition from Korea to Governor's to Governor's to Colby?

JK: Honestly, I'm not going to lie. I feel like there wasn't even a transition, I feel like. It was just so similar. My dorm looks the same and I'm still using the same pillow and everything. Some of my friends are still the same. I'm really close with one of my friends from Governor's, and then classes I'm taking are really similar too, but no Latin is huge - like so much better. It enhanced my lifestyle a lot. And then, I don't know. It's just - Korea to the United States was so different. I didn't know what to do, so I was so nervous. But Govs to Colby was - I feel like it wasn't even a transition I feel like. It was really nice. But Korea to Governor's, it's definitely like 100% different. Totally different environment and people, so yeah.

TG: Awesome. Is there anything else that you'd like to talk that I didn't get to?

JK: Not really, but yeah.

TG: Awesome. All right. I think we're all set. Thank you for your time, JK. I really appreciated you taking the time to be part of this interview and the project.

JK: Thank you.