

Abdel Abdelsadig:

My name is Abdel Abdelsadig. The date is October 5th, and I'm here with Rebeka Suh for our interview. Rebeka, could you just give a little bit of an insight as to who you are, specifically, like where you were born, where you grew up, and something about you?

Rebeka Suh:

Okay, my name is Rebeka Suh. My Korean name is Mokeun [and my] last name is Suh. So, like Korean... in Korean, you say it "Suh Mokeun." I am originally from South Korea. I was born in Daegu, South Korea, and then I moved to Guatemala when I was about eight-years-old and have been living there since then. Then after high school I moved to the US, where I currently am. Right now, I'm a junior at Colby—chem-biochem major—trying to go to med school in the long run, but it's getting harder and harder these days, so I'm trying to figure my life out. Yeah, that's basically me.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

So, I'd really like to get an idea of what are some of the earliest memories of your family life, whether that be in Korea and Guatemala, if you have early memories from each, just a little bit of an insight into those.

Rebeka Suh:

So, my dad is a pastor. He was always a pastor ever since I was born, so my earliest memories are always like at church, just going to church, growing up with the church family there and my life really revolved around it. I would, I remember, like my mom would put me through so many competitions at church. Because there they do these crazy things where you do Bible verse memorization competitions, and then they give you a topic on... draw out, you know, like a worship scene. And then so I would do like drawing competition for that. And I'd do worship songs, singing competitions and writing competitions. And that was not even when I was in elementary school. That was like, since preschool and kindergarten, which was, I think it was, really, really fun. I will also say that when I was in Korea I moved around a lot because... I was originally in south Daegu, and then I moved to Seoul, which is the capital, and then I moved to Busan. So even in Korea, I was moving around a lot. And in Korea I would say I was really super into things like dancing and singing and I'll say I wasn't really that studious. I was just not very academic. I didn't like going to academies for English or math or anything like that, but I did go to painting or drawing academy and piano academy. I was always in the church's worship dance team, because we do these things where you do the choreo for the worship, especially in... when you're little, when you're in preschool and then elementary school, that's what you do. So, I was always part of that. So pretty much, I was a free soul, free spirited and very much outgoing.

And, yeah, I loved my life in Korea, and then I moved to Guatemala, it was just so so completely different from Korea. I couldn't speak the language. I literally remember the day, or a couple of days before I moved to Guatemala, just sitting at my grandma's house and writing down the

English alphabet and being so proud of myself for, like, even being able to copy “A” and “B” and “C.” I was just so proud of myself. I was bragging about it to my grandma. And my grandma was like, “Oh, you're so good! You got this,” and everything. And then I come here, I come to Guatemala and I'm like, “What is this language they're speaking?” I feel like such a stupid person, like, I don't understand a single crap. Like, what is going on, you know? And then at the airport when we first got there, my parents were super paranoid too, because Guatemala is not a safe country. So at first my... I remember my mom literally holding my sister in her hands and trying to protect us, as that airport was just... it felt so hostile. It was so cold. It was just gray and unwelcoming. And when I, when we, went to our house, which was [on the] second level of the church, it was so empty and it was just... everything was so different. And nobody was out on the streets. There was... it was... it was just serious. It looked very dangerous to me. And this is getting a little long, but I remember when I first got there I was like... I got super paranoid, because I'd hear stories about Koreans being assaulted, kidnapped, shot to death and all that stuff, and how your all your windows have to be locked, you need an alarm system in your house, and how even when you go out in the car, the cars have to be like, you know, like, how... black? What do you call it?

Abdel Abdelsadig:

Tinted?

Rebeka Suh:

You have to be super tinted. You can't roll down your windows, you can't be on your phone in the car, because people will see and they'll point a gun at you and take your stuff away from you if they see it inside. So, I was super paranoid. I did not like... I will say that I hated it with passion. Every single night I would go around the entire church and the entirety of my house upstairs, lock every single doors, and even then I go to bed thinking about all the possibilities of how someone could break into your house and kill people, kill my family. So it was... it was... My early memories of Guatemala were not... not very nice, and I really missed Korea a lot. And my personality changed 180 degrees. I was... I went from being just like really super popular girl in my school to being a stupid, stupid little Korean girl that nobody knew where she came from and that looked different from everybody else, and I was... I didn't like it at first. I think my early memories are not that that good.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

That makes a lot of sense.

Rebeka Suh:

Yeah.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

Could you go a little bit more in depth as to why your family made the move to Guatemala? You explained a lot about how you really enjoyed Korea, and then you felt it was really hostile when you were first getting there, and you didn't like your experience there at all. Could you go a little bit more in depth as to kind of what the reasoning was?

Rebeka Suh:

Yes. So, my... Like I said, my dad is a pastor, and he... Pastors in Korea, they go through... They're not head pastors when they first start. So, the reason why my dad moved is like he's... he's kind of building his resume too, and building his experiences by going from one church to another. And he's getting hired by the churches as well. But the end goal was to become a head pastor, and he was looking into all of these different options available for him, and one of it was, for some reason, Guatemala. And I guess my parents always were thinking about moving away from Korea and kind of exposing us, and the whole family to a different country. I think they were always thinking about immigrating or going somewhere, living somewhere else that's not Korea. My mom's prayer request for all three of us was for us to become global citizens and for us to learn different languages and be exposed to different cultures. And I have to say, at first, when I heard that I was going to move to Guatemala I was honestly really, super excited and really, really happy, because I'd never been on a plane before, and I really wanted to experience that. And it was just like... It just felt like a little, small, little trip for me. I was too little to realize the drastic difference that it would bring, so I was just... yeah. My dad wanted to become a head pastor of a small Korean church in Guatemala. It wasn't, it wasn't necessarily for a ministry, or like a mission to Guatemala and people normally go to... if you go from Korea south to Guatemala, it's normally for missionary work, where you live with the Guatemalans and then you do ministry to them. But ours was a very interesting case where we moved from Korea to Guatemala to do ministry to the Koreans there for a very, very small Korean church. I do have to say, there's a lot of other Korean churches in Guatemala. There's like, two major big ones where there are about, I'd say, even like 500 people or 600 people. Our church is maybe tops, like 50. Tops. So, it was interesting going to that small group in church, but that was the reason why.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

So then, what kind of traditions or practices did you guys keep from during your move from Creative Guatemala? And that can be anything from like a dish you guys really like to make or a thing that you guys really like to do together.

Rebeka Suh:

Traditions, I think we never gave up on our Korean meals. You'd expect that if you're going to Guatemala as a Korean, you can't find anything Korean there. But by the time we were there, there was already a good amount of Korean population there. There was a Korean store that we could go to for ingredients, and there were different restaurants that we could go to - Korean restaurants that were really, like, honestly, really, super authentic Korean food. So we never gave up on food. My mom always cooked Korean dishes. Every single meal was Korean. So in terms of food, we always, always had Korean food. Tradition-wise, there are things like Seolnal (Lunar New year) and Chuseok (Harvest Festival), which is like Lunar New Year, and then the, I forget there's something else, but where we go down to our grandparents house, and everybody the all the relatives come, and then you just spend the whole weekend and the whole holiday there at the grandparents. And you do like sebae (new year's bow), which is like you bow to the to your grandparents, and

then the adults of the house, and they give you money. And then you play little games, like traditional games, and you go hang out with your cousins all the time. You go to church with them. It's like, and you eat all of these, like, really, really good traditional Korean food. It's amazing because everybody, like all the members of the family, will bring a different dish. So my mom would cook something from our house and then bring it to the, to our grandparents house. My aunts and uncles, they'd all bring something and maybe cook it together. And it's like, my grandparents house is, like, very, very, very small. It's in the countryside. It's a very it's like, so tiny. It's, it's really cute, but everybody would fit in there, like, even the adults, and we just have, like, like, what do you call it? Just, just bedsheets and blankets on the floor, and it'd be heated by, it's so cute. It'd be heated by this like, system where you, if you heat up, if you put fire on the I don't even know.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

Is it the ondol (heated flooring) flooring?

Rebeka Suh:

Yes, it's the ondol flooring. Yes, yes. How do you know that?

Abdel Abdelsadig:

I-I've done a little bit of reading, I love it a lot.

Rebeka Suh:

okay, yeah, it's ondol flooring. So it'd be like, my grandma would be like, putting the fire in there, and then it'd heat up the whole house. It'd be so warm, even if it's like, cold in the winter, and everybody's just sleeping together. Everybody wakes up together. We just cook and eat together. It'd be so nice. It was so nice. But, um, obviously, with us moving to Guatemala, we couldn't do that anymore, right? Because we don't, we can't go to Korea for all of the holidays like we if anything, we'd go like, every six years or seven years, which was not, not the best. And even then, we won't be able to celebrate those holidays with them, because it'd most likely be during the summer. But anyways, even then, we always make sure to call them during those holidays. And like we just FaceTime our relatives and make sure to be connected that way. And on top of that, our church would do similar things, where we, where everybody at church kind of brings Korean, a Korean dish, or we, we cook the Korean dish together, and we eat together. We do those sebae together to the, you know, the elders of the church, and they give us money, and we do the same traditional games together. We also wear hanbok (traditional Korean attire). We try to wear hanbok for the first couple of years as well. Like it was, we carry, we still carried on the tradition.

Honestly, we carried on the same traditions. It was really heartwarming. And I'd say our church is really serious about food too, so it was a big deal as well. So everybody got together, and like that morning, would just be like busy bustle of all the moms just cooking. And it's so nice. You know, I'd help my mom cook too, all the time. And you're just, you're just cooking for so many people. So it's like, like, the scale is different. You know, it would be like, so much food that you're cooking for so many people. And it's, it was just nice. So it was nice

Abdel Abdelsadig:

The church for you guys was really like a new family that you found in Guatemala, where everything else felt really dangerous or really scary, but this was kind of the community that really agreed with you, that didn't think you looked different.

Rebeka Suh:

yeah, yeah, yeah, for sure, because it was... they were all Koreans and had the same culture, similar backgrounds. So, yeah, it was definitely home away from home. Yeah.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

and then your parents wanted you to have this, like global growing up opportunity. You guys retained your Korean citizenship?

Rebeka Suh:

Yeah, we always just had Korean citizenship. We never had, we never got Guatemala, because we only got permanent residency in Guatemala. So it's interesting, because most of my friends in Guatemala, my Korean friends in Guatemala, were born in Guatemala, so they have dual citizenship, where they have Guatemalan passport and Korean passport, because their parents are Korean, but they were born in Guatemala. Ours was a little different, because we only, we came from Korea, so we never got Guatemalan citizenship. So it's different.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

And then how did your choice to kind of retain that Korean citizenship impact your opportunities or your decisions, or even your the way you were perceived in Guatemala.

Rebeka Suh:

I think we never really had a choice to get Guatemalan citizenship, because it's... you don't really need it. You can just live in Guatemala like that. I honestly don't know the legal aspect of what's what went on, but we do have permanent residency there. We don't have, we never had to get Guatemalan citizenship so it was, it was never a choice for me. But at the same time it was, it was different. I've always felt a little bit different than all of my other friends, because they grew up in Guatemala like they were born in Guatemala, so they could call themselves both Guatemalan and Korean. And they... yeah, they were fluent in Spanish since they were little, and also fluent in English since I read a little, because a lot of Koreans are, I have to say they're rich in Guatemala, very rich in Guatemala. So they send their kids to international schools since early age. So that's why a lot of the Koreans in Guatemala can speak fluent English and fluent Spanish. So that was that, our story was a little different, because I moved in, moved to Guatemala, and I didn't, I could not go straight into the international schools, because they're competitive to get into. If you can't speak English, you can't get in, which is honestly really weird. And the older you are, the harder it is for them to accept you, because then you have to learn the language there. So my parents put us through a local school, local bilingual school, where they say it's bilingual, but in reality, it's all Spanish, and you're I was just thrown in there.

remember like it was, it was also crazy, because I went in didn't know anything. The only thing I could say was puedo ir al bañyo, which is like, can I go to the bathroom because that's a necessity right? But apart from that, I couldn't... I couldn't understand anything. I literally cried myself to sleep every night because I didn't want to go to school. I'd be like, there was this one pigeon that would wake me up every single morning, and I hated the pigeon, because if that pigeon cried, if that pigeon cooed, that means it's morning and I have to go to school. And never wanted to go to school, never, never, never. And even when I started to understand Spanish and started to like for so how, I don't know how, but like, you know how, when you're young, you just can't, like, absorb things, and you just learn languages a lot faster. So I learned Spanish first. I don't know when, or I don't know how, but I did, and I started to understand it. I knew how to speak it. But for some reason, since I had I had not spoken Spanish for such a long time while in that school, I did not want that, like, you know, that moment of attention when I suddenly start speaking Spanish, then everybody would be like, Whoa. Since when did you start speaking Spanish? Like, you know, I never. I didn't want that. I just, I just was too shy. I didn't want that, so I just kept my mouth shut. I'd like, think about my responses in Spanish in my head, but I wouldn't say them. I'd be like, you know, nodding and just like, you know, trying to make sense of things. But then we went, we were so we were still trying to go to the International School, because we had to take a test to get in and do like, we had to do different interviews too. So my parents. Decided that the bilingual school was not working for us, so they decided to take us out of the bilingual school and put us through homeschooling, which was insane. Honestly, we I did not learn anything during that homeschooling time. It was interesting. I loved it because I hated going to school, but at the same time, I was like, if I continue on like this, I'm not going to learn anything, right? My mom thought we were getting somewhere. I didn't think so. My dad didn't think so. So we started to really, really study English during that homeschooling time, like towards the end of it, and then we applied to the international school and got it, and that international school is also like missionary Korean, not Korean American missionary school. So a lot of missionary kids go there for half the price that regular students that are not missionary kids go pay. And the teachers, there are also missionaries, American missionaries. It's English based. So we moved, we transferred to that English based International School. The crazy thing also is, like, we applied there twice, the first time we didn't get in, and only that, like the second Wait, actually the first time we didn't get in, and my parents actually put us back into the local school after a while, we tried it, we homeschooled, and then tried it again, and then got in. So that was that, that's how it worked. I got in that school was solely English, and that changed in environment. I was like, Okay, it's a new, environment, new school, new me. I'm gonna say hi to people, you know. And I said, that was the first thing I said, like, Oh, Hi. I'm Rebecca in English. And I was so proud of myself. And since then, it's been, it was fine. It was hard. It was a hard transition to that because a lot of like, it's a K to 12 school. So the friends had already like, they they'd literally, they grew up together. They were friends since kindergarten. They are just moving through together. I joined fifth grade, so I had to get myself into their friend groups and try to understand and try to, you know, make friends in that already, like close knitley friend relationship that they already had. So that was a little difficult for me as at first as well, but I made it work, and it worked, and my friends were really, really nice, so they also helped me out a lot. And it was nice because I had, there were a lot of Koreans there as well, so I felt I didn't I no longer felt like I was a stranger, an extra weird person, just out there, whereas the local

school, there are no Koreans. And I just felt like I was just, what am I doing here, you know, but this time, it was a little different, and I really really liked school.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

So throughout that entire process of being in Guatemala, it sounds like it was a really big struggle, and it was really difficult for you guys, the kids. Did your parents ever consider moving to another country or anywhere else after Guatemala?

Rebeka Suh:

There was a, I think, after my brother graduated from high school, my parents were looking into moving to Spain, moving to Spain for a different, different church there, but it never ended up working out. So we stayed in Guatemala, but my parents were considering that. We thought it was crazy, and I said, I'm not doing it again. I am not going to go through that because I was a that was a junior in high school, and junior year is, like, really, super important. Where do you where you really just have to lock yourself in and study for the APS SATs and try to do more extracurricular activities, because my goal is to get into college in the US, and as an international student, it's a whole different competition. So I told my, I told my parents, no, but they were pretty set on moving to Spain. I'm glad it didn't work out, but they were thinking about it.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

Is there a reason? There was kind of a focus on Spanish speaking countries, rather than like anywhere else, or even back to Korea?

Rebeka Suh:

I don't think so. I think my parents are really spontaneous. I'll say that just really, yeah, they're really spontaneous. They go where God takes them, and they they, there are people that. Moves by God's will, through God's will, and yeah, so they're spontaneous. That makes a lot of sense. And we're there, we're under their control, so you don't have a choice but to follow them. Yeah...

Abdel Abdelsadig:

okay, and then Was there a reason that the goal was university in the US rather than anywhere else?

Rebeka Suh:

I'd say it's because, like the school that I went to since it's like an American based High School. Everybody else went to colleges in the US. And if you're a Korean, a lot of my Korean, a lot of Koreans actually do go back to South Korea for college. But here's where another interesting part comes in, because, like, like I said, my friends were born in South Korea. They went through K to 12. They were born in Guatemala. They went through K to 12 in Guatemala. So in Korea, there's a thing called, like, 12 year guarantee, or 12 year benefit. Where if you've spent at least 12 years of education in a foreign country, you are given this benefit of getting into, like, top colleges in Korea, almost like you're guaranteed. It's really, really easy. It's like, so much easier for foreign students who have spent 12 years to get into colleges in Korea, like Korea, for

you to be a Korean student in Korea, try to get into those colleges, you have to study hard. Like, it's competitive to get in, you have to be, like, the top of your school to get into any of the colleges in Seoul, whereas, my friends got in just fine, they weren't stellar students. Some of them were like, they were not smart. I have to say they were not smart, but they got in, they got in, and it was like, so easy, you know, so so easy. But me and my brother actually, very different because we didn't get to live a full 12 years. We didn't get that full 12 year education in Guatemala. It was only... mine was actually really sad, because it was 10 years, two years off, and the only thing after the 12 year benefit is a three year benefit. And the three year benefit is obviously harder, because then now you're getting people that go to boarding schools in the US and apply for colleges in Korea. And the three year benefit people that apply are a lot, it's a lot, lot more competitive. It's not as competitive as if you're applying in Korea itself, but it's still very, very, very competitive to get in. So I was thinking about all the odds and I compared myself to other students, my friends, my Korean friends that had that 12 year guarantee and that could just get into these top colleges in Korea, whereas for me, I'd have to really grind. Even if I was, even if I had higher GPA, even if I had better extracurriculars, they get into colleges that are better than me in rank or like, just an education, because they had the 12 year guarantee, and I only had the three year guarantee, and that's exactly what happened to my brother, because he ended up applying to Korean colleges. And he actually applied to the colleges in the US too, but it didn't work out for him, so he applied to colleges in Korea, and he got into some of the schools there. So that was, it was never... I didn't really want to put myself through that, and I didn't want to go to colleges in Korea, because I knew it'd be really toxic, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to really survive that environment, because, like, I am Korean, and I have a lot of Korean values, but I felt like I'd lived away from Korea so much that I don't think I can adapt to the harsh like competitive culture and the drinking culture, there and all that stuff. So I didn't want to do that. I just applied to colleges in the US. Korea was like my backup plan if the US didn't work. But it worked out so...

Abdel Abdelsadig:

I'm very glad it did work out.

Rebeka Suh:

I'm glad to Yeah.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

I'm a little curious. So a lot of the time that you talk about your interaction with Korean communities in Guatemala, it's very intertwined with church. So, beyond like the church and the Korean communities there, how was it interacting with Guatemalan society? Let's say when you went to get groceries or like you went out with your friends, or things like that, how were those interactions?

Rebeka Suh:

This is also very, very interesting, because I actually did my interview on this topic with my sister yesterday, so it's super interesting. I first went there, and people don't know who we are, right? Like, we're different, we have different skin colors. We look extremely different. And I go

grocery

shopping, and everybody would stare. Everybody, not a single person, not staring. We'd be the spotlight of that grocery store. Just eyes on us every single time, and they'd split their eyes at us, and... It was not, at 1st it was not nice. Like, they just didn't know anything about us. Like, they weren't, they thought they called this Chino and china, which means like Chinese. They never asked where we were from. Just a lot of staring and no good interactions that went, um, went along. Yeah, but then, interestingly, after the K-pop industry, boomed and, like, all the Korean drama, Korean music, entertainment, and everything, things really changed. Like people would look at us, but not stare at us. They'd look at us and glance at us and be like, they talk, but not in, like, chino/china, just talking behind our back, it'd be because they're generally curious about us. They'd come up to us and ask us, are you from Korea? Do you know K-pop? Do you know BTS? And they'd be really curious about us, and If I went to an amusement park, before they'd stare, and they'd talk behind their back. But after all the BTS stuff went on, I'd be standing in line and there would be like these girls that approach me and say, like, can I take a picture with you? Because you look like the person that I see on this screen. I don't look like any K-pop idols, but I'm Korean, and they make that association, and they say, oh, you look nice. You look like that person I see that's dancing there and I want to take a picture with you. And it's, it's very, it became really different, and even the Korean restaurants and Korean food in general, at first, it was only exclusively Korean people that went to those restaurants that went to those markets. But then later on, it became a thing where everybody, like, all the Guatemalans would be enjoying the Korean food there. Everybody would be buying from the Korean grocery store, and they'd compliment on how good it is, how amazing our food is. And, I came to realize that the sense of racism that I was feeling before was not necessarily racism. It was just because people didn't know anything about us. They were just curious, and they just didn't know. Like, I would stare at someone, too, if they looked, like, completely different form how I looked, and I think a lot of the splitting eyes and all of that just came from not knowing, and just being curious about us rather than a sense of hatred. They had no sense of hatred towards us from the 1st place. So I came to realize that, and now with cable culture and Korean drama, then everything becoming so popular, and then having a sense of who we are and what our culture is after that, everything really changed. So, that was, that was really interesting to me, and I really, and I really loved that transition that I got to experience in Guatemala. And I think that changed my mindset on how I viewed the country itself as well, because before I was like, I don't like this country, the people here don't like me and I just, I honestly didn't just, I just wanted to leave Guatemala. But after that, I was like, wait, I was wrong. It was just because we never really took the time to share our culture with them. And I kind of looked back at my years at the local school that I went to, and I realized that I remember sharing, um, playing piano and teaching a song to my classmates in Korean to them. And they sang along in Korean. And I looked back and I was like, That was actually really wholesome, and that I should have learned a lot more about how willing these people are and how curious these people are about my culture. than just focusing on how miserable and dreadful going to school was for me because I couldn't understand anything. So, I really love, I love Guatemala now, and I think if I were to live through that transition again, I'd do it again. I wouldn't really care if the change, if K-pop became popular or anything, if I could do it again, I'd go back and approach it with a different perspective and do it with a different attitude towards the people. Be more open and, you know, just

understand that they weren't coming at me with hatred. It was more curiosity, and I misunderstood them. sometimes.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

I think that's really fair, especially 'cause you were a kid.

Rebeka Suh:

Yeah.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

Like, you didn't know any better. Now... I'm really interested in this big shift that you're talking about when K-pop and all of these things became really popular. How do you think that shift really impacted your social life in Guatemala? So, it became easier to talk to people? Did it become a little bit more difficult in any way?

Rebeka Suh:

It definitely became easier to talk to people, because people are approaching Koreans in a more positive light. They're appreciative of our culture. They love our culture and I appreciated that. And I think that's when I also started to appreciate the Guatemalan culture too, just to learn more about the culture of the country that I'm living in, whereas before I was just always, always bouncing back to Korea, trying to just cling onto my Korean identity, and then I think there was that transition of, well, if you're accepting my culture, then I want to accept the culture of the country that I'm living in now. And I, really started to love Guatemala and to love its culture, to love the food it had, the people, the traditional clothes, the traditional music, everything about it was, I think, it was, it became different to me in a sense. But, it's really complicated because I'm kind of sidetracking... Koreans and Guatemala, like I said before, are rich. So, we are the ones that, own textile mills, we own embroidery mills in Guatemala, and a lot of the indigenous population, they, they work for us at the factories. They work for us. Our parents' generation, the ones that immigrated to Guatemala, started to settle here. They obviously went through so much where they were targeted, they were killed, they were, they didn't have it easy with the Guatemalans here. They worked their way up in a sense. But at the same time, I think in a defense mode, they were also being really hostile to the indigenous population and the people that were working for them. I will say that the way we treat Guatemalans and the way we viewed them, was not in any way nice. It was very hostile. Our parents' generation would look down on them and would mistreat them, exploit them in a way. And... talk to them in a way that you would never talk to another human being. It's still there and it's still happening, and I think it's crazy that there's no study done on this, whatever is going on. But at the same time, it's a sad reality that I think someone has to go back and trace the history and try to find a way to make amends, because what we did to the Guatemalans was not right. A lot of it was not right. Obviously, they're still getting paid, but it was a lot of exploitation, and it was a lot of abuse. But at the same time, we have the 2nd generation, our generation, my friend's generation, who were born in Guatemala, who grew up in Guatemala, who have Guatemalan friends, who value the culture and have being Guatemalan as part of their identity. So, I think, right now, we're transitioning from defense mode, being hostile, because we need to protect our family, our parents'

generation to our generation being like, we are Guatemalans. We are one of them. Like, why are we being hostile to them? I think we need to move on from being hostile and from being other to now being, we gotta do something about it. And our generation is really, I think is different in that way where we're trying to make amends with the people and really becoming friends and really becoming part of Guatemala in that way. So, there's definitely the, transition from survival mode to now being like, okay, that's working.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

That makes a lot of sense. And then you also think that big shift in terms of getting interested in the other's culture was really helpful for that, right?

Rebeka Suh:

For me personally, it was, but I think it might be a little different for the ones that grew up in Guatemala, because for them, they were Guatemalans in the first place. They didn't have to learn about the culture in, in such a different setting. But at the same time, even the ones that grew up in Guatemala, I think they also kind of went through that same transition. K-pop was definitely a turning point.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

So your brother is currently going to school in Korea?

Rebeka Suh:

Uh huh

Abdel Abdelsadig:

Sweet. And then, a previous time that we spoke, you talked about him having completed his mandatory military training. How exactly did that impact your family, both him doing it, retaining citizenship, and all of that? In terms of them being in Guatemala while he's going back to Korea.

Rebeka Suh:

I think my brother always wanted to go back to Korea. He's older than me, obviously, so he was always more attached to Korea. He never wanted to come to Guatemala. He always had a longing for Korea and the freedom that he gets from having the ability to just walk around the streets by himself and, just the physical freedom of living in Korea, whereas in Guatemala, we just have to be always careful. Food is super important to him also, so the U.S. was like, he applied, it wasn't really his 1st priority because he knew that he wouldn't survive a day in the U.S. without Korean food. He doesn't like bread, he doesn't like pasta, he likes rice and kimchi. So, for him, it was obvious. It was a very obvious thing for him and a very natural thing for him to go to Korea and go to the military in Korea. We actually went to Korea to send them off to the military, all of our family. Right after my graduation, as my graduation party, you know, not party, my graduation vacation, and my brother going to the military, it just, like, somehow overlapped perfectly. So, we went to Korea, and we sent him off to the military, and, he actually came back to Guatemala for one of his vacations from the military, and then went back and finished his military service. A lot of times like, military can be really super hard. And I'm sure it

was hard to

a certain extent for him, but he went in as, like, a translator for the military service, and he got into a very interesting law related branch of the military. So he had an office job and everybody else would be marching in the sun and the scorching heat, just suffering, while he was just, in the office, air conditioned. Having it easy, you know? My parents were initially concerned because we didn't know where he was gonna end up, what branch he was gonna end up in, but it worked out fine. So everybody was happy with them in the military. And he's out now, so that's fine.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

So, in that vein, how do the broader historical events, like South Korea's rise to economic power, kind of impact your family specifically, seeing themselves as both Korean and Guatemalan? So you talked a lot about how our generation, the one that you kind of grew up with, that were born in Guatemala, see themselves as Guatemalans. How do you think that's kind of impacted the parental generation, like your mom, your dad, that maybe moved in a little bit later and didn't necessarily have all this time in Guatemala? Do they see themselves now as Guatemalans or are they still holding on to I'm Korean? Maybe one day I'll go back, things like that.

Rebeka Suh:

Oh, for sure. My parents' retirement plan is to go back to Korea. I will say my mom still cannot speak Spanish. She can talk to, like, the lady that works on Sundays to help out with some of the dishes because the dishes are a lot, just to clean the whole church because the church is pretty big too. But she can communicate a little bit and she can go to the supermarket and be like, how much is this? But that's about it. She's studying these days and she's learning more, but her Spanish is not very good. My dad surprisingly caught on really fast, I wouldn't say it was fast, but he's getting better and he understands a lot of things. His Spanish is not at all good in a way. Like, they can survive, but it's just survival. They can't really carry on a conversation in Spanish. They interact mostly with Koreans in Guatemala, so they don't really find it necessary to learn it [Spanish]. But they always want to go back to Korea. Because it's so easy. They can speak in their own language and have so much freedom. I can't imagine how much of a struggle they must have gone through, trying to raise three kids in Guatemala, trying to make sense of all of the adult life while they could not speak a single word themselves. I mean, we had people, other Koreans in Guatemala helping us, lawyers and all that, but at the same time, the sense of helplessness they must have felt in terms of just trying to navigate it. And I will say, a lot of the other Korean parents, can speak Spanish a lot better than my parents, and they can speak English a lot better than my parents, because they obviously spent more time there, and they interact with Guatemalans because they work with Guatemalans. My parents, it's a different story because we work with Koreans. My parents work with Koreans. They don't really work with Guatemalans, so it was different. My mom always felt bad that she couldn't speak it, and to this day, if my dad goes up to order something at McDonald's, she literally pokes me to go and help him because she thinks my dad can figure it out. But I know that my dad's got it, so I just, like, the baby, she's like, your dad just pretended, he's just pretending, like, he knows, he understands everything, but he really doesn't. You need to go help him out. And it's always the classic immigrant story where if you, if you have an email to write, then they would tell you to

write the email for them, and if you have to make a call, they tell you to call, you know, even delivery, I would still call Spanish for them, and, um, if there's anything difficult that I had to take care of, I'd be the one texting, I'd be the one calling, doing all the communication for them. But they always want to go back to Korea.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

So they still very much hold on to the idea that they are Korean, not Guatemalans?

Rebeka Suh:

No, yeah, they're for sure Korean.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

Okay. And to me, it really seems that your experience in Guatemala has been very, not to say, bubbled within a Christian, Korean community, but how do you think that has impacted your perception of experiences like being stared at in the supermarket or, people not really interacting with you in a positive way when you went to the bilingual school?

Rebeka Suh:

I'd say you're totally right. 100% right. And the fact that I was in a bubble of a Christian community in Guatemala, surrounded by Koreans and like surrounded by Christians in general. And that's what our school would always emphasize, you are living in a bubble. If you go out in the world, to the US or like any other place, you know that you were, you would know that you were in a bubble, and I completely agree with that. There was not a lot of interaction with the indigenous population for me. Because Guatemala's social hierarchy, socioeconomic hierarchy has a large disparity. You have the indigenous population, you have the Mestizos, which is a mix of indigenous populations and the Spanish people, and then you have the Spanish, the generation of descendants of the Spanish colonized groups. So, it's crazy because the Spanish people are the ones that are rich. They're loaded. Let me tell you, they're loaded when I say they're loaded, they're loaded. There will be people that have their personal helicopters, to go to the U.S. to shop in the weekends, and they come back, and if there's too much traffic, they'd call their helicopter person to come pick them up and just get to their house, and their houses would be, like, super big, with so many different cars, motorcycles everywhere, and... they own the plantations, and the mestizos are in the middle class, in a way. They're the ones that go to bilingual schools and know some English and work some office jobs and stuff. Then you have the indigenous population that live in villages, in the mountains, and farms. They're the ones that are poor... So, the interaction from my end was in my American school, I was surrounded by these rich kids from Guatemala. And then my bilingual school was more Mestizos, middle class people. Then the people that I interact with every day, like day-to-day lives, supermarkets, or just out in the restaurant, or if I go on mission trips... I would be interacting with the indigenous population. It was never really, personal relationships if that makes sense.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

The generation before us, the parents, think of themselves fully as Korean, not Guatemala. Our generation, those born in Guatemalan, some of those that immigrate into it, feel as though they

are Guatemalan, because of how they were raised or their ability to kind of permeate into that society. What do you think the generation after that is gonna feel?

Rebeka Suh:

That's a really good question. I think... I really don't know. I would say they'd feel much more integrated into Guatemalan culture. And... Their Spanish would be a lot better than our generation's Spanish, and... They would feel really Guatemala, too, in a way, because, we are Guatemalan, so they're also... Yeah, they're just Guatemalans. They would have a more free spirited mindset. There's a distinction between Guatemalans and Koreans, Koreans are very, very, like, strict on time. You gotta be like disciplined and everything. Chapinos, Guatemalans, they're leisurely. Like life goes by, they're happy go lucky. You know, if you arrive late, you're late, and if something happens, I don't know, whatever, you know? I genuinely love that about them, because it's so free. Even if they're living in not the best of conditions. They're still cheerful people. They still make jokes, they still love their culture. They still love their country, and they're really, really friendly, if you get to know them. They're really friendly people. Koreans, I think, especially, our parents' generation spites all over, wanting to succeed and just being strict on time. So I think part of the reasons why a lot of our parents' generation mistreated bottomless because of that difference. Like, as workers, and as employers, you'd expect the employees to just be on time, do the right job, fast, fast, fast, you know, Ppalli ppalli culture (quickly quickly culture). But, Guatemalans, they don't do that, you know? They just arrive, and then just go, you know? It's that type of thing. I think it's a lot of differences in culture, but definitely the next generation's gonna feel a lot more Guatemala, a lot more free and easygoing.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

That's awesome. So looking back, what do you think has been the biggest challenge? And then what do you think has been the biggest joy of growing up in Guatemala?

Rebeka Suh:

The biggest challenge was... The language and the dangerous environment of Guatemala, because people break into your house, or shoot others, there's gang violence everywhere. That was really, really hard because I just didn't want to lose any of my family members to any of that. The language, because if you can't understand anything, then it's really just hard. to live. Um, and if you can't express yourself, it's suffocating. That was the hard part, and then the joy for me was realizing what my passion is. Because if I didn't live in Guatemala, and I wasn't exposed to so many different cultures, and if I didn't learn these different languages, and if I didn't interact with so many different people, I would not have thought of anyone beside myself in any way. Just seeing that disparity, and just having experienced all different parts of the social hierarchy, in a way, in Guatemala. My heart is towards bridging the gap between the poor and the rich, and it's insane just seeing how much, especially in healthcare, how much difference in quality of healthcare people get. Just from being born to different parents, different social statuses. It is just really painful, really, really, really painful to watch. But I say it's my joy because I feel I learned so much from it, and I want to do something about it. Like, I've developed my passion towards healthcare, and towards medicine. By living in Guatemala, by experiencing all these things, by watching and observing and developing my curiosities there. And had it not been for that experience, I would not. developed any of those.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

That's wonderful. What do you hope future generations will remember or carry forward from your experience?

Rebeka Suh:

What do I think, or what do I hope?

Abdel Abdelsadig:

It can be both.

Rebeka Suh:

Um.. I almost don't know. I guess. I'd hope that if anyone sees me and watches me grow as a person, I would hope that they think they could do the same. Because I thought everything was impossible, coming to the US, even speaking a different language. If anyone heard my story, I hope that they realize that somehow, they're gonna make it through, and, just that there's nothing impossible. If you live life, then you'll live it. I don't know what I want to be remembered for. It'll depend on who I become in the future or what I end up doing.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

I like that answer. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you feel is important to share? It can be about your family's story, your sense of identity, your hopes for the future, anything.

Rebeka Suh:

I'd say emphasizing that, it's really hard for me and my siblings because our friends are Guatemalan Koreans, with their passports and dual citizenships. We are just Korean citizens, and we were kind of slow in adapting to the culture and accepting the culture. So, every single time I say I'm from Guatemala, and I try to say I love the culture, and I love Guatemala I feel like I sometimes don't even have the right to say that, because I have my friends who know a lot more than I do in terms of the culture, the language, and just, appreciate it a lot more, and then they're more, they're a more integral part of Guatemala. And I, honestly, have only just begun to appreciate it, appreciate its culture. And I say I love Guatemala, and I really genuinely do, but I sometimes feel like I need to learn more about it, immerse in this culture more, learn more Spanish, learn more about Guatemala in general. Go out there and get out of the bubble of my Korean culture, and the bubble that I live in in Guatemala. And just really come to appreciate Guatemala as Guatemala, not as... me as a Korean in Guatemala. I don't think I'll ever say that I am Guatemalan. Because by law, I'm not. But, it just has been so long. It took me, it just took me so long to accept the culture and accept the beauty of Guatemala. I just don't feel like I can say that, you know, I'm, like, my other friends. But I do love it. And I'm proud that I'm Korean. Yeah, but that's it.

Abdel Abdelsadig:

All right, well, those are all of the questions that I have for you today. Thank you so much.

Rebeka Suh:

Well, thank you. Thank you, thank you.