**Landon Myer:** All righty, so this interview is being conducted on the eighth of October 2025 in the Alfond Commons in downtown Waterville, Maine. I am Landon Myer. I'll be the interviewer for this. And you are?

**Ashley Kwon:** Ashley Kwon.

**LM:** She will be the interviewee here. Firstly, I'd like to thank you, Ashley, for joining me today. I appreciate your time.

**AK:** No worries. It's a pleasure.

**LM:** Let's start with the questions. Could you tell me a bit about the circumstances of your birth, where it was, when it occurred, and to whom you were born?

**AK:** I was born in Austin, Texas, in 2003, at around 12:05 AM. It was actually kind of funny, because my mom got to stay an extra day in the hospital just because I was born, like, five minutes after midnight.

**LM:** Where and with whom did you spend your childhood?

**AK:** When I was a kid, I think I kind of moved around a lot. I was born in Texas. I stayed there until I was about two. Then my family moved to San Jose, California, where my sister was born, and then we moved to Fishkill, New York, and then stayed there for also about a year, and then came back to Austin, where my brother was born. But I guess my most salient memories of my childhood would probably be in Austin. That's where I have the most memories of my surrounding community, my neighborhood, my friends, my elementary school.

**LM:** Have you lived anywhere else since that childhood period?

**AK:** In 2011, I moved to New Jersey, when I was in first grade.

**LM:** And whereabouts in the state do you live?

**AK:** People argue about its existence, but Central Jersey, *Central Jersey*, about 15 minutes from Princeton. I live in Belle Meade.

**LM:** Thank you. Now I'm going to move into some questions that relate to your family background and experience. Where in Korea are your parents from? And could you tell me a bit about how they've described their hometowns?

**AK:** My mom's side of the family was primarily from Seoul, that's the main city of South Korea. I don't really know if I can compare it to any other cities in the US. The closest would probably be like Boston, a mix of Boston and New York, maybe, although, obviously, since they're different countries, they're not super comparable. My mom tells me a lot about growing up and going to school in the city and the activities that she would do with some of her friends after school, like going to karaoke and going to eat *tteokbokki* (simmered rice cakes), like street food. My dad's side of the family, though, is from a pretty different area of the country.

They're from Busan, which is kind of a coastal town, and so I kind of see how that locational difference plays out when it comes to family dynamics. My mom's side of the family is–I don't know how to explain it. The women, they've definitely embraced the traditional, domestic role of housewife, at least that's how I think my mom and my grandma are. They aren't that way when it comes to expressing their personal opinions and being invested in other topics, such as politics or whatnot. But compared to my grandma on my dad's side of the family, my great aunts on my dad's side of the family, they're definitely way more outspoken, and there's almost more of a matriarchal household kind of setup.

**LM:** Do you have anything else to say about Busan or anything your dad spoke about growing up?

**AK:** I have a fun memory of my dad telling me how he peed his pants on his way home from school one day because he just didn't want to go to the bathroom at school. I think it was just—I don't know if they were dirty or something—but he just held it the entire day, and he thought he could make it, but he didn't. [Laughter]

**LM:** Moving on to a little bit later in your parents' lives, how and when did they meet?

**AK:** It was almost like an arranged marriage kind of setup. Actually, it was that my dad's grandpa knew my mom's aunt, and so they both were talking, and they realized that they had a bachelor and a bachelorette within their sides of the family. And they just thought that it would be a good setup, and they met, and they liked each other enough to get married. My dad had grown up in the US for the most part, because he moved to Texas when he was in middle school, and so it was really my mom that made the decision to come move to the US after getting married.

**LM:** That actually kind of ties into something I wanted to ask a bit about. So, your parents obviously immigrated to the United States at different times. Do you know more about what caused your father's side of the family to move to the US?

**AK:** I definitely think it was more financial reasons, because my dad's side of the family—almost

all of my dad's mom's generation—they're all in the US right now, because I think they definitely bought into that idea of the American dream. My grandma thought that it would be better for my dad's education, but after getting here financially, she didn't do so well. Actually, she, I believe, ran a small grocery store, so she was working most of the time when my dad was going to school. But for my mom's side of the family, I, as I said, I really think it was just getting married. My mom moved here to be with my dad, and I don't know specifically what her motivations

were, other than that relationship. I really just think that she came here for him, because her education was all in South Korea: her degree, her previous job, so I guess she just came here when she got married.

**LM:** Moving on, I would like to ask about another related subject.

Is there anything interesting you had to say, or just any way that you feel like your parents specifically talked about this experience of the move, or what it was like to adapt to living in the US? Did they ever express a desire to return to South Korea at some point?

**AK:** For my dad, he moved here when he was in, I think it was third or fourth grade, actually, he was pretty young. And so he did talk about how there was quite an adjustment just because he moved to downtown Austin, which isn't exactly the most diverse area. I think he did talk a little bit about how there was a learning curve with the language, obviously, and—being like the only Asian kid at his school—it was a little difficult for him to make friends during the first few years. But then once he got a better hang of speaking English~~,~~ and he started to get a better idea of what his career aspirations were~~,~~ he definitely settled in, and so his desire to return to Korea really wasn't quite as strong as my mom's. Obviously, my mom has a stronger tie to South Korea, just because she grew up there and she left South Korea when she was twenty-nine. So, for her, it was really, really an adjustment, leaving behind a lot of her social connections, making new friends here, making new ties when it comes to her church community, eating food… For her, she was shocked by the fact that American corn was really sweet, because Korean corn is just—I've had it before—it's kind of almost sticky in texture, kind of dense, and it has a very subtle sweetness to it, definitely not like crunchy and candylike, kind of like American corn.

**LM:** This is another one that you've touched on a little bit with that previous question, but I was wondering if you felt that your parents have felt that they've been more connected with American

culture or more with their Korean heritage. Also, I'm kind of wondering how that passes on to the next generation, whether or not you and your siblings feel this stronger tie to American culture, or feel a closer connection to your heritage.

**AK:** I think that's a difficult question for my dad. I think for both of my parents, they definitely have a stronger tie to their Korean heritage. They sometimes would joke that, if a world war broke out, that they'd probably return to Korea, just because they have pretty strong pride when it comes to Korea's culture, whether that's food or technology—music—right? With regards to how it passes down generationally, I think that my siblings and I also definitively have a stronger tie to our Korean roots than the American side of our identity, just because… We recognize that we're definitely Americanized Koreans, right? Because none of us speak Korean very, very fluently, although we use Konglish, the mix between Korean and English, and we use traditional Korean pronunciations when we refer to certain very distinctly Korean items. But also, we've spent all of our lives in America. We've gone back to Korea, maybe once when I was in fourth grade. My sister was in third grade, my brother was somewhere in elementary school–I'm not going to do the math right now. We really enjoyed our time there, but it definitely wasn't exactly the place that felt like home.

**LM:** Was there anything about that experience visiting Korea for the first time that really stuck out? Any sort of memories of that first moment, or first short couple of days visiting that really struck you?

**AK:** I think it was more just being surrounded by people who used the language. Because I think when it comes to skill-wise, it's a tiered kind of system between my siblings and I. I would say that my Korean skills are the strongest, followed by my sister, followed by my brother, because me and my sister, we both went to Korean school, which was a language school that we attended

on Saturdays, because my mom wanted to make sure that we knew how to speak and read and write, at least to some basic level, but it really showed me how much I differed from the typical Korean who grew up in Korea, because I think language is just one of those things that was a source of insecurity, but that was only amongst my Korean American peers, who did speak Korean fluently. When I was in South Korea, people seemed to be actually kind of impressed that I knew how to speak Korean at all, having grown up in the States,

and nobody would really make fun of me for making small speech errors. They just gently corrected me, and it really helped me expand my usage of the language.

**LM:** Wonderful. Since that original experience, have you had the chance to go back to Korea at all, or was it just that one visit?

**AK:** I was actually able to visit Korea last year. During January, I did an independent study about traditional elements of traditional Korean and Japanese music, and how they're still present in the pop culture of both countries today. I really loved that experience, because if I'm being honest, it kind of felt a little bit like a vacation for me. I was able to spend a lot of time with family in Korea. I hadn't seen my grandma or my uncle on my mom's side in, like, 10 years, so getting to just do simple things, like share meals with them, or even go to small touristy areas with them, was really, really valuable, and I appreciated, again, being able to practice my Korean without being judged. I think it's more of people at restaurants, people at stores that recognize that I'm probably not a native speaker, but they kind of just take it in their stride, and they're very patient.

**LM:** I'd now like to go a little bit deeper about what you understand Korea to be like, based on your personal experience having visited there a couple of times, and also based on what you've learned from your parents. I'm curious to see what you think about regional division within the

country. You touched on this a little bit with your discussion of your parents' origins, but I'd like to hear a bit about what you think. Is there like a sort of animosity between different regions? Is there just a strong cultural divide in some places, or do you feel like it's more unified?

**AK:** I would definitely be leaning towards more unified, just because South Korea is such a small country. When I visited in fourth grade, my family and I actually did a road trip, and we were pretty much able to cover the entire country within a week. And that was making a circular trip throughout all the major regions. I think most Koreans, regardless of where they are, have pride in being a South Korean. And the only things that really distinguish those different regions is what's the most important parts of their daily life. Sometimes you see different regional dialects of Korean. I think there's one called *Saturi*, something like that, which is basically the country dialect, and it's seen as kind of old fashioned and a little bit unfashionable, just because it's associated with people's grandparents who often live in the country and run a rice farm or something like that. But each region also has certain elements that they're proud of. People really like going road tripping in Korea, just because the rest stops are usually an example of the regional foods. If you go more towards the coast, you might see *gejang*, which is one of my favorites, which is raw, marinated crab. Some places have certain kinds of *jeon*, which are battered, fried vegetables. They have variations of Korean classics. Even though there are some pretty distinct differences, I think everybody's just proud to be a Korean. [Laughter]

**LM:** That's another point that I was hoping to get at. We're going down the whole list! I wanted to hear a bit more of what you thought about Korean identity, South Korean national identity, in particular, because you've mentioned that it's something that you and your family still feel very strongly, despite having lived in the US for quite a while. I just wanted to hear your impression of what Korean national identity looks like in the peninsula itself.

**AK:** I would say it's really just a matter of national pride. I think that historically, there's obviously a very definitive reason for that, given Japan's colonial presence there, but Koreans are very protective, I think, of certain aspects of their culture that they feel are distinctly theirs. I've seen so many debates online: there was a video game that labeled a *hanbok*, like Korean traditional wear as a *hanfu* (a word for traditional Chinese clothing), or something like that, and the Korean netizens, they were not having it. They were so upset. And a similar incident where at one of the Winter Olympics or something like that, China had many different representatives from a lot of their provinces, and also the traditional wear associated with each of those regions. And there is a certain area in China that received pretty heavy Korean immigration just due to political unrest, and so the representative from that area of China came out wearing a *hanbok*. And Korean people felt that it was a personal attack, because there's also been a little bit of conflict over who invented kimchi. Because I know Japan has this variation, which is *kimuchi*, and then Korea has kimchi, which I think is the most widely recognized version. But China also has a version of fermented cabbage, which has a similar-ish name that I actually can't recall right now, but generally Koreans are just very protective of what they feel is theirs. And whenever they feel like there's an attack on their culture, they're very quick to gather to unify and rebel against whatever the threat is. At some point, Japan put a trade embargo on a specific kind of metal that was used in semiconductors for certain cellular devices, and Korea just decided to boycott Japanese goods for a couple of months. [Laughter]

**LM:** Thanks for sharing that perspective. I'd like to move on a little bit more to the Korean American experience as distinct from the Korean Peninsular experience. Something I wanted to ask about is whether you felt that, growing up, your family was more connected to Korean communities socially, or if you felt that your family just mingled with people who live nearby,

whether your community was more focused on region or neighborhood or something like that, or if it was more connected to Korean identity.

**AK:** I definitely think that my family, our community, was definitely distinctly Korean, even though that was shaped by the families that were closest to us, in our neighborhood. My family really only interacted with other Korean families. For example, we went to church pretty much every single Sunday. We went somewhere called *Changyanggyohoe* (Praise Presbyterian Church), which is like "Praise Church" [in English], which I think is actually a chain of churches that also exists in Korea. If I had to guess, at least 99.5% of all the families who attend church there are Korean, and at a lot of the events, the catering is all Korean, although people come to the kitchen to cook, right? I mean, for my siblings and I, our social circles were definitely more diverse just because we had exposure to our peers going to school, playing outside in our cul-de-sac. I will say that my school district is pretty diverse. If I had to guess, I think most of my neighbors would be Indian or Chinese. It was 50% Indian and Chinese. Maybe more than that, maybe 60% Indian and Chinese, 40% white–38% white, 2% everyone else. I forgot to leave room. [Laughter] But my parents, especially my mom, all of her friends, were Korean. My dad, outside of work, of course, all of his friends were Korean. He was a Sunday School teacher at my church. For my brother, my sister and I, we just mingle with anyone.

**LM:** Was that something that was different depending on where you lived? I know you mentioned you've lived in four different places throughout your life, so was that something that you saw as a constant, living in California, New York, New Jersey., and Texas, or was it something that was mostly present during your time in New Jersey?

**AK:** I think it's been present all throughout my life, actually. Obviously, when I was very young, I don't have that many memories of interacting with Korean communities. For example, in

California, I don't have any distinct memories of my family interacting with any other Korean families, but in Fishkill, I remember that we had a few pretty close family friends, and they were all Korean. I remember his name was Nicholas, and he lived a little ways down our street, and so I would go to his house for play dates a lot. But in Austin, we definitely had a tie to our Korean community, because we attended another church that was dominated by Korean families, and we'd spend all of the major holidays there, although my school district there was pretty diverse. Most of the people who lived on my street, though, like my neighbors, were white.

**LM:** Another area that I actually wanted to ask you a bit more about specifically was your experience with Korean American Christianity, or the Christian culture that is pretty prevalent amongst Korean American communities. I wanted to hear firstly, in general,
how you felt the experience of being a Korean American Christian was growing up, or how it may have impacted your experience living with your family.

**AK:** I think that the role that going to a Korean church had in my life was primarily social because I was raised Christian, but I don't think I've ever really had a strong connection to organized religion in any sense, even when my friends and I were supposed to be engaging in prayer. I really just couldn't see a point to it. It's not like I don't believe in God. I would say that I still believe in some sort of higher power. But I don't know if I would label it as God. It's more like I believe in karmic retribution, balance in the universe, but that's about it. So, everything that I remember about going to church, it has to do with the field days that my church would host, where all of the families would get together and basically have a picnic out in Duke Island Park or Colonial Park, whichever. Or something called *Sarangbang* (reception room). It translates to love room, which doesn't sound quite right, but it's basically just Friday night worship groups. My parents were pretty well established in the church, so without fail, every time they would get

picked as *Sarangbang* leaders, right? They would lead group worship, but it would just be a couple of families coming over to our house, or us going to someone else's house. We have dinner together. We have a couple of snacks the parents, they do worship, and then the kids are just hanging out with one another. Also, growing up, one of my strongest friend groups was the friends that I made at church during service, or during my My Life Group, which is basically like when everyone would split out into grades and also by gender. My last one was all of the twelfth grade girls, for example, and some of them I still keep in touch with, even today.

**LM:** Would you say that most members of your family have that experience of it being more of a social environment that you engage with, or do you think maybe for your parents or for your siblings that it is more about the religion than the community?

**AK:** I think maybe somewhere between. I think that for my siblings and I, it's definitely more of a social function. I think that if you were interviewing my sister or my brother, they would probably have something similar to say. But for my parents, there was definitely a very important religious function to going to church because they're very devote [sic] Christians. Like I said, my dad was a Sunday School teacher, and my mom was part of the praise team for a long time, and she would also help organize some of the social events. She was on the parent board for our Saturday Korean school. So, she would actually help–I think she was a treasurer.

So, it was, for them, more of having a safe space to, I don't know, engage with their faith, but with people that understood them, that shared their cultural experience.

**LM:** I was also curious to hear if you knew anything about your family's connection to Christianity in the past. Did your parents talk about the process of their conversion to Christianity, or their family's conversion to Christianity? Or was that something that just wasn't really ever a subject of conversation?

**AK:** I don't think it really was a subject of conversation. My mom alluded to having had an exploratory phase, almost, with religion in the past, because I know that both my dad and my mom, I believe, were raised Christian as well. So, my dad kind of just picked it up, and it was a consistent factor in his life, although I think he started believing more strongly as he matured, as he became an adult. Versus my mom, she was also raised Christian, but she had a couple family members who were Jehovah's Witnesses, actually. The one that stands out to me is actually my great aunt. She lives in Maryland right now. She approached my mom when she was a young woman, a young adult, and kind of asked her if she was interested in maybe converting to a Jehovah's Witness. And basically presented her with their main text. She read through it a little bit, and she thought about it, and then just basically had to tell her, "No, I don't really think it's my thing. Like, I think I'll stick to Christianity."

**LM:** We've done quite a bit of talking about your family, family background, things that you have a connection to, but aren't distinctly about your life. Obviously, there have been some parts about your personal experience, but I wanted to ask you a few questions that are just more directly related to your personal experience with Korean identity in your life. Something I wanted to ask about is, now that you're a student here at Colby, have been for a while, do you feel like you've become more or less connected to your Korean identity or some form of Korean culture during your time here at Colby?

**AK:** I'm going to be honest, I actually don't think that my connection to Korean culture has really changed since coming to Colby. I am very involved with Colby's Korean Club. I'm one of the co-presidents with my friends Rachel and Daniel–we call him Hee-won. But I feel like it's just stayed a constant throughout my life. Growing up, I was always exposed to the

language, the food, the music, the pop culture side of things, just because I was constantly surrounded by other Korean people. Now that I've come to Colby, I still have a decent number of Korean friends, especially amongst the board members of Colby Korean Club,
and we have get-togethers sometimes where we prep food for events, and some people speak Korean way, way more fluently than I do, but I don't think it's ever really wavered. Just because I'm not directly engaging with Korean culture doesn't actually make me feel any less Korean.

**LM:** You're a senior now at Colby, so post-graduation, are there any ways that–moving into wherever you go next in life–you would like to engage in Korean community once you graduate, once you're out in a city somewhere?

**AK:** My plans after graduation are to maybe take a gap year and then apply to law school and hopefully go the following fall. But with regards to how I'll stay in touch with the Korean side of my identity, I think I would just like to travel to Korea more frequently. My plan is to live at home for the most part, but I'd really like to visit Korea at least a few more times within the following years, especially with my mom, since it's been a very long time since she's visited Korea, I think it's also been around 10 years for her. The last time that she visited was when we all visited as a family, when I was in fourth grade, so it's definitely, definitely been a while. I'm excited to see her thoughts on how the city that she grew up in has changed, whether that's the places that she used to visit growing up, maybe reconnecting with old friends. I'd really just like to be there to see that,

**LM:** One last question: something that you've spoken about, just now and also the beginning of our interview, is the experience of visiting Korea. You've indicated here that that's something that you'd definitely like to do again more frequently than you've been able to in the past, and I was actually curious to hear whether, if you were given the opportunity to move to South Korea

permanently, do you think you would make that choice? And if so, do you think it would be a permanent thing, or do you think you would maybe only want to do it short term?

**AK:** I think that would just really depend on where the rest of my family is. As of now, my brother, my sister, my mom, we've all been living in America for–I mean, for me, it's my entire life, right? For me, it's at least twenty-one, twenty-two years. Same goes for my mom and then my siblings, it's their very existence, right? So, if my family were to make that move with me, I would totally, totally be willing to make that a permanent change, because I've lived in America all my life, but I don't really see any issues with being somewhere that makes my mom happy, first of all, and being somewhere where there are already lots of familiar elements of life. I'd like to be closer to my grandma, my uncle, my extended family in Busan, because some of them are there, I'm pretty sure, although I'm not super familiar with them. The only thing that I would really worry about is professional opportunities, especially since I'm planning on going to law school in America, I don't really know how transferable that degree would be if I wanted to practice law in Korea, for instance, and there would definitely be a learning curve for the language, but I feel like if I lived there for even just a couple months, it could make a big difference in my fluency. So, short answer: if my family were to move with me, I would make it a permanent change.

**LM:** Thank you for being willing to do this interview with me. I really appreciate your time and your willingness to answer so many questions, so many varied and sometimes wandering, incomprehensible questions. [Laughter]

**AK:** No worries, I had a great time. Thank you.

**LM:** Glad to hear it.