

**Transcript**

P- Hello, can you say your name for us?

J- Yeah, my name is John Jeong. I am currently a junior.

P- So we're going to start with your birth. Where were you born?

J- I was born in Busan in South Korea. That's in the southern part. I don't remember the hospital name I was born, but I was born in July in the summer. Very hot weather.

P- And what was your family like there? Your parents? What did they do?

J- Well, my dad was, I remember him, a typical working dad. He wasn't as involved. I wouldn't see him as much growing up. I think the main disciplinary person- or the main educator- in my house was mostly my mom. My dad would go to work and then come home with a lot of snacks. I remember he would buy fried chicken coming home. And I always remember always looking forward to that every night.

P- Every night?

J- My mom wouldn't like it because she always said it was very unhealthy for kids to be eating fried chicken so often. But my brother and I always loved to look forward to him coming home. I wouldn't say they were super strict. They didn't care about grades or homework or as much, but I think my mom was the one in charge of most of the discipline, but then if it got serious, that's when my dad would have to step in.

P- Do you remember any of those, any of those moments?

J- Well. I think stuff like lies or whatever, like... Okay, let's say I was supposed to go to this afterschool program. And then I didn't. I skipped it and I just went with my friends. My mom would be like, "I got a call from the school after school program that said you didn't come. What happened?" And I was like: "Oh, that's strange. I did go." And I would lie. Stuff like that, small lies or whatever usually.

P- And she found out?

J- Yeah. For that stuff usually, my mom was the one that kind of took care of it, but stuff that is about whenever I disrespected my mom or if I had attitude issues, I think those were when my dad would probably step in most of the time.

P- And you mentioned your brother. Older? Younger?

J- Yeah, he's seven years older, born in '97.

P- So, that's home in Busan. And then when did you move to the United States?

J- I moved to the United States right after finishing elementary school in Korea. And then I came here, in sixth grade. I actually first came to Kansas. I lived there for one year. And then I moved to New York in seventh grade.

P- Did you come halfway through the year or was it-?

J- No, surprisingly, I came in the beginning, so, you know, there wasn't much... Well, actually, now that I think about it, a lot of the elemen--sorry-- the middle school, that I went to was connected to, the elementary school. So a lot of the middle school kids, even if it was the

beginning of middle school, they knew each other from elementary school. So, even if I did come at the beginning of the year, everyone kind of knew each other.

P- What was the size of the school?

J- I remember the whole school being around six or seven—

P- Sorry, your grade.

J- 150-ish, yeah. They knew each other pretty well.

P- Do you remember why your family moved over? Was it due to your dad's job?

J- Yeah. It was due to my dad's job. He. He worked in the Korean Embassy, and they had sent him to the U.S. I don't think he planned on staying here for this long, but, you know, it just worked out because of me and my brother's education. And so we did end up staying here longer than expected.

P- So going into school, you're saying that everyone knew each other pretty well. What was the shock for you coming into it? Did you speak English when you came here?

J- No, not a lot. I think I knew the ABCs. Even with that I kind of got messed up. You know, I knew basic slang from watching movies like, "What's up"? I was like, "Yo". And stuff like that. But I didn't really know how to properly speak. I remember I did not know the concept of "Ma'am". Every time I would watch movies I would only hear "Sirs" a lot. So I didn't know-like, I thought "Sir" was for both woman and man. And so I would call my female teachers, "Sir, thank you, sir." And I remember after whole months of doing that one of my teachers said, "You know, it's actually called ma'am." I was like, "Oh, so there's a difference." Yeah, but I got along.

P- Were there other Koreans in your school there?

J- Actually, yeah, there was one Korean. that he actually came in the middle of the year. And then I remember my teacher, she made him sit next to me so that I could help him and translate stuff for him. But mind you, I've only been in the U.S. for like a couple of months. I had no idea what was going on, so I don't know how she expected me to help him, but yeah, his name was Min-jun. I remember he was very good at math. But yeah, there was one kid.

P- So after you moved to New York, after Kansas, how was your school different there? And how did that feel differently?

J- Definitely a different environment. The middle school in Kansas was, you know, was what you would expect typical middle schoolers to do. Like, you didn't really care about your future careers or going to a good high school or, whatever. You only cared about recess or doing sports or the football game or whatever. But I remember when I went to New York, everyone was so focused on "I have to go to this good high school, I have to do these extracurriculars." And I remember being very shocked. I was like, "We're already thinking about this?"

P-You were in seventh grade

J- Yeah, I was in seventh grade and people were already taking prep school and prep programs for the high school entrance exams and stuff like that. So, yeah, I remember being very shocked and felt out of place.

P- Did you miss Kansas?

J- Yeah, yeah. I missed it a lot.. You know, even though ethnicity-wise, in Kansas, it was a lot more, homogeneous and a lot more... Not a lot of Asians there. Like, the culture was different, but everyone was very welcoming. I never felt out of place, necessarily. You know, they even all tried to help me adjust. So it was a very welcoming vibe, but when I went to New York, like 90, 80% of my school were Asians. A lot of Asians, a lot of Koreans, a lot of Chinese. And so even though culturally, we were very similar, I felt even more out of place there.

P- And so in New York, don't you have to apply to high schools? So how did that process work out for you?

J- Yeah, so usually they take the test in the middle of seventh grade. So it's pretty early. They take it in middle seventh grade, and they usually start preparing for it as soon as the start of middle school, some start at the end of elementary school. So I was not really prepared for it at all. I was like, I didn't even know the program that much. So when I learned, "Oh, everyone's taking this exam", I didn't really prepare for it. I just took it, you know.

P- Look at that. You ended up at a good school.

J (laughing)- I mean, yeah, I did pretty good.

P- So, when you came to the U.S., how much did you miss Korea and what things stood out to you as the most foreign? What were the biggest adjustments to you? Other than obviously the language.

J- I guess the thing I missed the most was, obviously, friends, relatives... But also, I felt like. Korea was... Just people in general were very willing to help each other out and... I mean, I don't know how to put it. Just the feeling of "I belong here." Like I don't feel out of place. If I'm on the bus, you know, I'm not getting stared at. You and I look the same. We speak the same language. But coming here, I definitely...I always.... I guess it didn't bother me really, but I always knew in the back of my head that I am a foreigner here. Like, I am not necessarily the same as people here. And that feeling of being an outsider, I did feel it sometimes.

P- Did moving to New York make you feel less like that? Or, you were saying how it almost made you feel more like that?

J- Yeah. Moving to New York made me feel even more like that, because even though there were more Koreans and more Asian people, the personality of native born- let's say Koreans versus Korean Americans- is completely different. Like, how we interact. I would say it's a lot more independent and kind of like you have to do everything for yourself. There's not really a lot of helping out here. Whereas, in Kansas, despite me being even more different, I feel that the culture was not as culturally different from back in Korea. Everyone was still helping each other out, trying to hang out together. It was welcoming.

P-So, let's talk about church now. Did you go to church in Busan?

J- Yeah, I did.

P- What are your memories of that?

J- Well, that was the church that I've been going to all my life. I never changed church, actually that's the church that my parents first started going to when they were college students. So my parents had- my whole family has- very deep ties to that church. The kids my age, I grew up

with them. They were around all my life, you know? Every Sunday we would hang out, even on Wednesdays, we would have Bible studies or whatever. A lot of retreats, I remember staying up all night, playing games and just hanging out. I think it was a core part of my life growing up.

P- So, when you came to America, did you guys attend online or like, how did you keep in touch with that church?

J- No, I don't think they had an online service back then. I think the only form of communication was private, you know, my parents or I would personally text families that we were especially close to, or my home pastor, stuff like that. I guess we weren't connected to the church as much. More like personal families in the church.

P- So when you came to Kansas, did you guys attend church there?

J- Yeah, yeah. We attended an American church. It was my first time. It was very different. I wouldn't say in a bad way, but it's just very different. To be honest, I don't think I completely got used to it, even by the time that I left. But it was a good experience, a good new experience.

P- And so in New York, did you start going to a Korean church?

J- Yeah, yeah. In New York, I did start going to a Korean church but even though it was a Korean church, there were still some differences between it and my Korean church back home.

P- It felt very American still?

J- Yeah, yeah. Especially the kids. Because I would mostly attend the kids ministry or the... Well, not kids, but like the teenagers' ministry or whatever. So I wasn't involved as much with the adult service, but the kids I would see there every. The interactions we would have were very, very different.

P- Were there any other first gen immigrants or were they all...?

J- Yeah, I think I was the only one. I think they were all, second, third gen.

P- So you're saying that it felt like there was a cultural gap already between you guys?

J- Yeah, definitely. It felt more within a boundary of, okay, I go to church with you. Instead back home, we would hang out outside of church. It genuinely felt like a friendship. Whereas here we were just like, okay, I see you on Sunday. And that's it. We each go about our busy week. We don't really talk, we don't interact. And then, next Sunday we see each other. Not the same level of community.

P- So when you came to Colby... Now you go to a mostly white congregation here at Colby.

J- Right.

P- How does that feel?

J- I don't know. I mean, I've enjoyed it. I think the level of community is different because I'm a college student attending a local church. So I'm more connected to the college group instead of the church itself. You know, I barely know Pastor Brent here. I barely know any of the elders. Even after church, I only usually talk to other Colby kids, so I think this is a special situation, being a college student and then going to a local church.

P- So, speaking about the Colby kids—it's getting very self-referential- you did meet some first generation kids and other Koreans. And so how is that? What was different from the fellowship here compared to your fellowship at home?

J- At home?

P- home as in New York.

J- I didn't really have first gen friends back in New York..

P- Maybe first gen's not even the work because here there's study abroad students. Full "actual" Koreans.

J- Yeah, real.. Just kidding (laughter). I did feel the sense that I almost had to interact with them because of our connection, the ethnic connection. We always- this might be kind of sad- but we always say among our friends, "if we would have met in Korea, we probably wouldn't have been friends." Which is... I would agree at some point. Like, our personalities, the way we communicate, the things we like, are so different. And I'll say the only thing really connecting us is our culture and ethnicity. So in that way, it is different from back home. Not unpleasant, but different..

P- So, recently, you did go back to Korea for January. What was that like? Well, first let's start back. How many times have you been back to Korea since you came here?

J- A lot? I've been, I don't even know if I can count. I usually go every summer, so what is that? Seven years. Probably at least seven, I want to say, seven, eight times.

P- How long in the summer?

J- Yeah, just in the summer, usually for probably less than a month, like, two weeks usually.

P- Do you stay with family then?

J- Oh, as in, do I stay in my relative's house?

P- Yeah

J- Oh, no. We have our house in Busan, so we usually stay at our home, but, you know, we see our relatives basically every day when we stay there.

P- So having your home still in Busan, does it feel like you're coming home still? Every summer, did it feel like you're coming home? Did it start changing?

J- I think it did start changing. Yeah. It did, I would say. And now it felt like I.. Maybe not in the beginning, but after a couple years, it felt like my "home" home was now in New York. And then I was kind of going to this place every year for a short period, almost like a cabin or, you know, like a vacation home or something like that.

P- When you were there, was it spending time with family? Did you catch up with your friends? Like, what did you guys do when you were there?

J- Yeah, a lot of that. I mean, the only reason why we're going there, to be honest, is just for friends and family. Like, so, yeah, spending time with other people, I'd say, was the most important thing.

P- And were you able to keep up those friendships? How have those lasted?

J- Some have lasted. Not all of them. I would say probably out of the numerous relationships I've had, the ones that are still... that I still keep in close contact with nowadays is probably two or three. Those are the kids that I grew up in church with, my parents know them. I've known them since birth, so, family friends.

P- Okay, so fast forwarding to January. That was a more extended trip, by yourself, right? How is that?

J- That was.. Honestly, very... It was mixed feelings because this was my first time staying in Seoul for an extended amount of time. So, I realized there's quite a lot of differences between Seoul and Busan. There's a lot of moments where I had to kind of be by myself and I couldn't see my relatives or friends as much as I wanted to. So, yeah, I mean, there's, you know, some parts I enjoyed, like my friend from Colby who also went with me. So I would see her a lot, but there were some days where both of her were busy or she was busy or whatever, so I just had to stay in my room all day eating from the convenience store. Yeah, it was mixed, say.

P- Was it different than you expected?

J- Yeah, very different. I thought I was going to be very extroverted and take this opportunity to be the best: go out as much as possible, see all of the attractions or whatever, try all the food that I've been missing- which I did eat a lot of food, but not as much [as I wanted to]. I think it does have to do with my personality. I realized my energy level and my introvertedness can't handle going out every day, all day.

P- And you weren't with your family, right? (rhetorical tone)

J- Yeah.

P- So.. When you were there, did you miss anything from America when you were in your room eating convenience star food?

J- Things from America..

P- I mean, maybe there was nothing.

J- Did I miss something from America? I guess the feeling of always being surrounded by people that I know, family and friends, I guess I missed that feeling, but I don't know if it specifically had to do with America.

P- Yeah. Just the people specifically.

J- Yeah, yeah.

P- Right. So when you came back, did it... So in one sense, you're saying because you were coming back to people that you know, it might feel like coming home- did it feel like coming home?

J- Yeah, it actually did. Which I actually remember being very surprised about. I always thought.. I would tell myself that, "America is just a place I am living in, but my homeland is Korea, that's my home, that's where I feel most comfortable." But I found it very surprising. Like when I landed, I had the feeling of "oh, I'm back home." And then I found myself having those feelings, it was very unexpected.

P- How do you feel about those feelings?

J- It just made me realize that I've really lived here a long time. I've really adapted. In some sense now I feel even more comfortable living here than Korea.

P- When you go back home-to Korea, sorry, I have to be more clear. When you go back to Korea and when you're here at Colby talking to Korean students who are studying abroad, do you feel American at all?

J- I guess, like.. relative to them, I'm, like, yeah, I've lived here longer than you, I know more about America than you. But I wouldn't say I feel American necessarily. I still feel Korean when I talk to them, especially when I talk to study abroad Korean kids.

P- You don't have any trouble culturally,?

J- No, not really.

P- So, part of being a Korean male citizen is military service.

J- Oh no (laughter)

P- Yes. Growing up here, what were your thoughts, were you thinking about it?

J- Yeah, of course. I think once I reached high school, the thought was always there. I was always thinking, "what should I do"? Should I go in the middle of my undergrad, or after graduating? Like, what would be the best time? You know, it was always in my thoughts.

P- It's still in your thoughts, I'm assuming?

J- It is. Well, I think now I've kind of pushed it off to the future where it's not an immediate thought. I have a lot of other things I have to worry about, like getting a job and I feel that now I'm putting military as my second priority. Like, okay, after I've kind of figured things out here, then maybe I'll go to the military and then I'll come back and continue my career or whatever.

P-That puts you later than a lot of your peers.

J- A lot.. My friends are starting to finish their service right now. I'm getting texts like, "oh, I'm out of military." I'm like, "wow, if I've gone when they've gone, I would have been over it by now".

P- So what have you heard about service from them? What were their experiences?

J- Pretty easy, actually. I don't know. Obviously, socially, culturally, there's a lot of talk about how military career nowadays is very different from back in the days. Some people say like, maybe it's too relaxed, maybe it's too...gives too much freedom. There's not enough. enough. What is the word I'm looking for?.[the word was discipline] Not enough, essentially, to the standards of being like a good soldier. Like, "oh, we're not training them hard enough, good enough". Like there's a lot of those thoughts and worries. And, talking to my friends, they're like, "yeah, my superior officer, he bought me steak over the weekend and I have time to watch TV whenever I want". I'm like," oh, I didn't realize it was that nice now."

P- So you've just heard positive things?.

J-Yeah, I've heard mostly good, positive things, yeah.

P- When you came to Colby, I remember you were thinking about going after your freshman year. Why did you decide not to do that?

J- I think because I had another option once I decided for sure I was gonna go on the pre-med track. I was like, "okay, is going after my freshman year better or if I'm gonna decide to fully commit to being pre-med with going after med school, maybe as like a military medic, would that be better?" And back then I thought that the second option, going as a medic, after med school, after whatever, would be a better option than just going after my freshman year.

P- Okay, so we had a mutual friend who had gone after his first year.

J- Michael?

P- Michael, yeah. And he came back [after military service]. Was he at all a factor in not wanting to go right after your first year?

J- Yeah, I would say so. Just the thought of being 26, 27 when I'm graduating, like, "Wow". That's kind of crazy, I'm not gonna lie. Definitely had a factor in it, yeah.

P- So you mentioned med school. Do you think that your position on wanting to go through as a military doctor has sort of influenced your desire to stay committed to med school?

J- Yeah, of course. That's such a big part. Honestly, if after all of this waiting- just to not go to med school and then just go later as a regular infantry or whatever, that sounds horrible to me. Like, going as a medic pretty late is pretty normal for Korea, but, you know, imagine after graduating being like 25, 26, going to military. It's just with normal kids who are like 19, 18, 20, yeah, that sounds horrible. That's why that is a big factor why, you know, I'm committed to staying on this track.

P- What does serving, what is being in the military mean to you? What does that tradition mean to you?

J- I always, you know, thought of it as just like a task that everyone has to go through. It's not necessarily out of a sense of patriotism, like, "oh yeah, I want to serve my country or whatever." But it's just, like, "okay, if I'm born in this country and literally everyone my age is doing it, then it's just like another thing I have to do", it's not like something I have a choice in. Almost like a task that I have to complete, you know?

P- Another checklist.

J- Like a checklist, yeah.

P- So, speaking of returning to Korea, his is maybe a little bit too hypothetical, but-

J- I like hypothetical.

P- As of now, what are your plans in the future pertaining to returning to Korea versus staying in America?

J- Well, the optimal, in my dream situation it would be: I get into med school, I get experience working as a doctor in the States. And then when I'm old enough to maybe open up my own clinic or whatever back in Korea- I don't know, 40s, mid 40s- hopefully, I'll be able to return. But that's if everything goes right. But I do want to eventually go back to Korea despite what I end up doing here. I've always wanted to. I don't know. Is this like, too weird to say, [but I would like to], finish my life with my people, with people I have common grounds with. That thought has always been there.

P- But you don't want to right away. So I'm assuming, right, you graduate from med school. You go serve, or would you do residency, and then serve in your military service?

J- Probably.

P- And then come back to America?

J- Probably come back.

P- Is there any reason why?

J- I just think. If I got a MD degree in the U.S., it'd be such a waste to right away go back to Korea. I could have so much better working experiences [in the US], build my career, use all

those years of studying and earning this degree to benefit me- as opposed to just right away going to Korea where the experiences and like opportunities for doctors I would say are not as good as in the States. It's just that I want to use my degree.

P- Are your parents considering going back?

J- Yeah. My parents, honestly, they're getting up there. They're getting pretty old. I think my dad is nearing almost 60. My mom is also nearing almost 60. Like, you know, I would say at the latest, by their mid 60s or something, I'm sure they will go back.

P- Is your brother here, still?

J- My brother is here. Yep, he's still in Kansas, actually.

P- Oh. Did he ever leave Kansas?

J- Like, to visit?

P- No, like, did he come with you guys to New York?

J- No, no, he stayed there.

P- So, have you ever thought about becoming an American citizen, or has that even passed through your head?

J- I've thought about it. I would say I'm honestly still thinking about it. I haven't reached a decision. There's always the opportunity to have dual citizenship. So I think that'll be cool. I mean I would still have to serve in the military, but after that, why not?

P- When we were talking about home, and you're saying "home", the two places seem to have different aspects of home to you. Could you speak a little about what is home about Korea and what is home about here?

J- Yeah, definitely different. I think, honestly, a lot of my idea of home back in Korea is out of nostalgia and is based in memory. It's what I grew up with and even the store signs in Korean or the buses or announcements in Korean, these are things that I'm used to. I feel like I just share a commonality culturally. I think in that sense, I do feel closer to Korea, but honestly in terms of family and people and the majority of my relationships- they are American based, so that I think has the biggest factor in my idea of America as my home.

P- I want to retouch real quick on Korean Americans. You were saying your church here was full of Korean Americans who felt culturally American to you. What does Korean mean to you?

J- Oh, I don't know if I can.. Huh... I don't know. It's just the mannerisms, the way they talk, the cultural things that I can talk about with them, like, "oh yeah did you watch this K- drama from like the early 2000s"- one that everyone in Korea would have grown up watching- or talking about certain foods that we enjoy, or even the way we joke around I noticed is different between like Koreans and in Korean Americans. I mean it's something that I can't point my fingers to. It's just, this is what makes Koreans, Korean. This is what makes me feel like they're Korean. But it's just you get the sense, you know? It's different.

P- Well, with that, we can end it. Thank you very much.

J- No problem