

## **Dream street**

**In tightly knit Korean hub, families have begun anew**

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Hai Suk Yang begins his workdays at 2:30 a.m., filling pans with spongy balls of bread dough in the cramped kitchen of the Yummy Bakery on Fireweed Lane. His day doesn't end until long after dark, when his wife, Chan Im Yang, pulls the chain that turns off the neon "OPEN" sign in the front window.

The Yangs lived comfortably for many years in the busy city of Incheon, South Korea, where he supervised a semiconductor factory and she taught elementary school. Hai Suk studied the bakery trade, and in 2002, the family crossed the Pacific to begin a new life.

Hai Suk's boss in the semiconductor factory had said Alaska is the best place in the United States. The water and air are fresh, he told him. Small businesses could grow strong without competition. The schools are superior.

"It's more stressful for my parents but less for us" since the move here from Korea, explained their son, Min Cheol Yang, 21. "They do physical work ... Not that hard in Korea. Harder here."

The Yangs work more and make less money than they did in Korea. But here, Min Cheol and his sister, Min Young Yang, 23, can master English and pursue degrees at the University of Alaska Anchorage, where both study medical technology. That, the Yangs said, makes the long hours worth it.

It's a familiar story on Fireweed Lane, a gritty Midtown avenue lined with worn parking lots and '70s-era strip malls, where Korean is spoken almost as frequently as English.

Inside some small, rented storefronts, there's the feel of another era -- one shop resoles boots, another sells replacement parts for coffee percolators. Even Yummy Bakery seems old-fashioned, with its perfect loaves of fluffy white bread set in rows.

On and around Fireweed you can get a facial, buy herbs, play a chesslike Korean game called Baduk, pick a faux designer handbag, browse Korean-made baby blankets, get a haircut, alter a suit, rent a movie, buy underwear, visit a healer, shop for groceries, get taxes done, make travel arrangements, pick up pastries, drop off dry cleaning, read the paper, worship God, buy fresh-made rice cakes, fix jewelry, replace a vacuum cleaner belt and eat bubbling tofu stew from a hot stone pot.

All without speaking English.

Though the street means different things to different generations of Koreans in Anchorage, it has, over the last 20 years, become the city's most visible ethnic business district and the heart of Anchorage's Korean community.

"Koreans like to commune with other Koreans," said Korean Community of Anchorage president Joon Ki Rho through Han Choe, the vice president, who translated. "Once one focal point is established, Koreans like to set up businesses."

Fewer than 400 Koreans lived in all of Alaska in 1970, but now community leaders estimate there are between 6,000 and 8,000 in Anchorage alone. Virtually all are from South Korea. Anchorage's clean environment, cooler and drier climate, lack of competition for small business and close-knit Korean community are all major draws, many say.

A Korean-language phone book lists close to 400 businesses. There are at least 20 Korean churches. Two competing weekly Korean-language newspapers sit stacked in doorways across the city. The community sponsors scores of Korean-language civic, church and social organizations, including the Korean School Foundation, Korean Seniors Association and Korean soccer, bowling and golf clubs.

Fireweed functions at once as a launching pad for first-generation Korean entrepreneurs like the Yangs, as a destination for a self-sufficient Korean-speaking community and as a magnet for new generations of Koreans, as well as non-Koreans, seeking ethnic goods and services of all kinds. In that way, it has become a center of exchange between generations and cultures.

## **CULTURAL MIXING BEHIND STOREFRONTS**

Down the street from Yummy Bakery, at the top of a carpeted staircase in one of several Fireweed strip malls completely occupied by Korean-speaking businesses, Andy Jee runs Han Mi Deer Horn. The shop dispenses disks of reindeer antler to make a popular tea said to promote blood flow.

His is among a set of businesses catering only to Koreans, including busloads of summer tourists.

Jee, like the Yangs, doesn't speak much English. He has been in America for more than 20 years, living in neighborhoods where many things could be done in Korean.

"When I lived here, dealt with the community and business, I did not have the time to go to school," Jee said through a translator. "The need for me to learn English declined. Now that I am older, it's a little embarrassing."

Koreans here may have held on to their language more successfully than any other large immigrant group. About 80 percent of the Koreans in Anchorage in 2000 didn't speak English at home, according to the census from that year.

Jee sometimes visits mainstream businesses, like Costco and Wal-Mart, but like many Korean speakers who travel to Fireweed, his world centers on the street and other pockets of Korean-owned business, where he shops and gets other services, like haircuts.

"I find it more comfortable and convenient to go to Korean businesses," he said.

Jee's type of business isn't in the majority of Korean-owned businesses on Fireweed. More often, behind the doors that advertise in English and Korean, cultures mix.

A few blocks away from Han Mi, at the New Central Market on Northern Lights Boulevard, it's no longer just Koreans filling the Valhalla Center parking lot in search of musk-melon ice-cream bars, Bird's Nest Drink and freshly made Korean sushi.

"We got everybody -- Filipino, Thai, Chinese, Samoan, Hawaiian," said Ruby Kinsey, the market's manager. "I'm surprised to see a lot of single American (white) guys coming in here shopping for Korean food."

Gina Han, who owns the VIP Restaurant next door to the market, has seen an increase over the last 10 years in non-Koreans coming in for delicacies like tiny bowls of pickled vegetable salads, called panchan, or bibimbop, a rice dish drizzled with spice and sesame oil and served in a hot stone pot.

Television and military tours abroad make people open to trying new things like Korean food, she said.

"I think there's been a change in the culture," she said, with Kinsey translating.

## **A MULTILAYERED COMMUNITY**

It isn't just non-Koreans who come to Fireweed to experience the culture. A growing group of younger Koreans travel there to find the foods and hear the language of their parents' homeland.

Young Suenram, president of the Korean American Coalition, calls himself part of the 1.5 or "Il Jum Oh" generation, a group of Koreans who came to America as children and are completely bilingual.

The group's members, mostly professional 30- and 40-somethings, see themselves as between the Korean-speaking first generation and the more assimilated English-speaking second generation.

Suenram's parents brought him and his three sisters to Anchorage when he was 9. His mother worked three jobs: two in janitorial and one as a kitchen assistant at the Hilton. His father was a hotel maintenance man. His parents' generation's work ethic is shaped by the memory of the Korean War, a severe and economically devastating period in Korean history.

"I remember, living in Korea, the only person who got to have an egg was me. One egg a week," he said. "I was the only boy in the house; that is how I was raised. It's a small thing, but I have that memory."

"The second generation, for sure, they don't realize how hard it was in terms of living in Korea."

Korean immigrants in United States tend to form communities that are more traditional than they might in their home country, he said.

"The Koreans that come over here, they are isolated by themselves. (They) want to hold on to the heritage and go back to what they already know," Suenram said. "Before they came here, they strived to be more Americanized. Once they get here, they want to be more Koreanized."

Suenram's group aims to connect second-generation Koreans more with the Korean community and to also encourage first-generation Koreans to be more involved with the city as a whole. They plan to teach citizenship classes, encourage voter registration and organize translated political debates.

"You hear about how the Koreans are off to themselves always in a small community and never doing anything for America," Suenram said, adding that the perception that the community was insular fueled anti-Korean sentiment during the Los Angeles riots of 1992. "We want to be part of the community."

For second-generation Korean Matt Moon, 23, a Harvard-educated environmental scientist who is running as a Republican for an East Anchorage seat in the state House, Fireweed Lane represents the distant struggles. He was born here, and his parents are professionals. He speaks some Korean and occasionally travels to the neighborhood to get his hair cut at a barber favored by his family or to have his suits altered. If elected, he'll be the first Korean-American to hold state office, but he doesn't like to draw attention to that.

"If I win this race and John Tracy asks me on election day, 'Matt Moon, how does it feel to become the first Asian-American member of the House of Representatives?' I will feel very uncomfortable," he said. "That's not how I want to be defined."

He wishes he had a better command of Korean but doesn't like the idea of a Korean community separated from the mainstream by a language barrier.

"If you want to grow in this community, you should make an effort to learn the language and the culture," he said.

At Yummy Bakery, Yang has little time to think about anything but plans to move to a bigger location on 36th Avenue. He'd like to hire employees. Maybe then he'd find time to study English. For now, though, it's mostly just him and Chan Im to set the bread to rise, fill moon-shaped doughnuts with bean paste, slip the cream horns into cellophane and count the till.

For that reason, night or day, the light in the front window on Fireweed is nearly always on.