

Jazmyne Carter

Jcart114@uncc.edu

Guns, barbed wire, patrolling soldiers, and chanting protesters. Gas masks that occupied valuable space in our hallway closet in case of a North Korean attack. Although scary at first, these images were the norm for me and my family when we lived forty miles from the North Korean border, where “the enemy” was always ready to strike. But to South Korean natives, the North Korean people on the other side are not their enemies, instead they are lost siblings cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents.

I went to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) twice, once with my dad and once with my 8th grade class. At the line of demarcation, there are both North and South Korean soldiers, facing each other, glaring at each other from behind sunglasses, daring the other to move. Their sole purpose is to make sure the other does not try to bolt to the other side. I stood in front of an invisible line, constructed by two superpowers that tried to establish their political beliefs in a susceptible territory sixty years prior. I was reminded of the protesters that sometimes stood outside of the base on my way home from school. Though I could not understand the signs, I knew that their protests of the American military being in Korea stemmed from a place of hurt.

Having your presence in a foreign country being protested as a young adult is a jarring experience, since we as a family were following what we were told to do. Although there was nothing I, as a middle school student, could physically do about the American occupation of South Korea that had been going on for generations, I believed the best I could do in my position

was to spread peace on an individual level. Most Korean people were receptive to Americans in their communities, for which my family and I were very grateful for. It made us not afraid to venture out and try new things. Not being afraid to try these new things made me curious. I wanted to be able to interact with my community, so I learned how to read and write Hangul through Korean language apps and practiced what I learned by reading the signs on the businesses I passed on the way to school. I visited the War Memorial of Korea and the National Museum of Korea, to see Korean history as Korean children were taught in school. I took part in cultural exchanges in my community, which included making traditional Korean foods and wearing traditional outfits for Chuseok, the Korean Thanksgiving, and having barbeques and picnics in order to get to know each other better. We made kimchi, the national dish of Korea, not only to help the elderly members of our community, but also to symbolize togetherness.

Through education and communication, I was taught a new world that made me see that the American way was not the only way. Korea taught me the values of patience and tranquility, which is seldom appreciated in America due to the fast paced nature of everything. Living in Korea taught me the power of unity, not just within a group but among different groups. The motto of the joint forces of the Korean and American armies is “We go together”, which is a powerful sentiment because separately, no one person is powerful but by joining together and allowing for communication and dialogue, we can all make a difference. Even though we may not speak the same language, knowing how the other thinks and feels allows for both parties to prosper and will create a deeper, more meaningful relationship.