

'Godfather of Asian American Journalism' and Fearless Champion for the Underdog K.W. Lee Dies at 96

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K.W. Lee, a towering figure who spoke truth to power as an award-winning investigative reporter, editor, publisher and revered community sage, passed away peacefully on March 8, surrounded by his family in Sacramento. He was 96.

Known as “the godfather of Asian American journalism” and fearless champion for the underdog, Lee, a Korean immigrant with ink in his blood, led a remarkable life full of firsts in a trailblazing, half-century-long career that embodied the print journalism ideal “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.” Among the outlets where he served as a staff reporter or editor were the *Sacramento Union*, the *Korea Times English Edition* and the *Koreatown Weekly* in Los Angeles, the *Charleston Gazette* in West Virginia, and the *Kingsport Times-News* in Tennessee.

The first Korean immigrant to work as a mainstream newspaper reporter in the continental United States, he would often say that his coverage spanned the “Jim Crow South to the Yellow Peril West.” His reporting work earned him more than four dozen journalism awards, including the National Headliners Award, in 1974 and 1983.

He was the first recipient of the Asian American Journalists Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 1987 and the first Asian American journalist to receive the Free Spirit Award from the Freedom Forum in 1994. He founded the first English-language Korean American newspaper in 1979, and edited a second over a decade later. He also co-founded the Korean American Journalists Association. He was enshrined in the “Newspaper Hall of Fame” at the former Newseum in Washington, D.C.

But the grand titles, honors and catch phrases do not do justice to the depth and scope of his impact in his adopted homeland and on the thousands of people of conscience who considered him a cherished colleague, mentor and champion of the downtrodden. Often described as a force of nature, he told stories that helped change the world for the better.

In that sense, his parents perhaps gave him the perfect name. K.W. stands for Kyung Won, which means “good tidings” in Korean, though the perpetrators of injustice might take issue with that.

Born on June 1, 1928, in Kaesong, what is now North Korea, Lee immigrated to the United States in 1950. He studied journalism at West Virginia University and University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, with dreams of applying the principles of a free press in his newly independent homeland. When Cold War instability and repression in Korea quashed these plans, Lee set up roots in the U.S.

As a reporter for the *Kingsport Times-News* in Tennessee in 1956, he quickly adopted the byline “K.W. Lee.” The name led to some surprises when he showed up to assignments with his Asian face.

By 1958, he had joined the *Charleston Gazette* in West Virginia, where he met Peggy Flowers, an emergency room nurse at Charleston General Hospital. Working the weekend police beat, Lee would hound her for details on the latest victims of accidents, DUIs and knife fights. After she accepted a ride home from him on a rainy day, the love story began. “At the risk of sounding like an old sentimental fool, she was my America, in body and soul, who came to the rescue of an exile, providing him with a normal, happy home and a new career in the new world,” Lee said in a 2011 interview. Two of their three children were born in West Virginia.

Through the 1960s, as a reporter covering the race and poverty beat, Lee shed light on the region’s most persistent dysfunctions. His articles exposed businesses upholding segregation and humanized the plight of the state’s coal miners. He reported on local government corruption and fair elections—a direct extension of his concern over the breakdown of Korean free elections and democracy during the same period. When President Lyndon B. Johnson announced his 1964 War on Poverty, West Virginia was one of the proving grounds. As the Appalachian Volunteers came into the region—mobilizing the participation of communities in anti-poverty initiatives—local politicians and other officials tried to obstruct their work. Lee’s telephone number was shared among the volunteers, who saw him as a truth-exposing ally.

For one series, Lee lived for four days with impoverished families in the grim hollows of Appalachia to humanize their daily struggles. It was in West Virginia where Lee said he found American nobility, noting how these families offered him their food even as they lived hand to mouth.

And West Virginia also embraced Lee back.

Huey Perry, who was the director of the Mingo County Economic Opportunity Commission project in the 1960s, recalled meeting Lee, a reporter who clearly wasn’t from Mingo, or even West Virginia, but had arrived, armed with his notebook and pen, to “tell the story no one else dared to tell.” He exposed election fraud that had robbed the votes of coal miners and struggling families for generations. This led to federal indictments of Mingo County officials.

“For the first time, there was hope,” said Perry, a Mingo County native, of the impact of Lee’s work. “The day K.W. Lee left for California, the people wept. They knew he had done what he came to do.

“And today, as the news of his passing reaches these hills once more, we weep again. Not out of sadness, but out of gratitude. Because for one brief, shining moment, a man with nothing but a pen stood against the most powerful forces in Mingo County. And he won.”

In 1970, Lee and his family headed west, after he was recruited by The Sacramento Union to be its chief investigative reporter. Described by his city editor as a “heat-seeking missile,” he uncovered threats to public safety from nuclear power plants and exposed exorbitant pensions that state lawmakers were secretly giving themselves. The latter, known as The Golden Dome series, made K.W. Lee famous or infamous, depending on who you were.

A radio ad for the *Sacramento Union* boasted of his feats: “K.W. Lee ... digging, probing, tackling the bureaucracy, infiltrating the unknown!” It was during his tenure with this paper when Lee would also work on one of the most important stories of his life. Over nearly six years in the 1970s and ‘80s, he wrote 120 articles on Chol Soo Lee, a Korean American who was wrongfully convicted of a 1973 murder in San Francisco and sentenced to life in prison. The stories have been credited with helping to spark a landmark pan-Asian American social justice movement that successfully fought for Chol Soo Lee’s acquittal and freedom from prison.

“It was just by the grace of God I have eluded the fate that fell on him,” K.W. said of Chol Soo Lee, in a 1994 interview with the-news broadcaster Sandra Gin. “Because there’s a very thin line between him and me. I was lucky. He was not lucky. There are an awful lot of unlucky people. Especially Asians. They have no language. They couldn’t tell their story.

“The institutions, the media, and law enforcement, the judicial system have continued to remain ignorant and insensitive. And that’s why I felt, you know, it was my calling to make some small dent in that wall of ignorance and insensitivity.”

Ranko Yamada, a leader in the movement to free Chol Soo, said K.W.’s articles moved people to action for two reasons: the “genius in his writing” that made a complex case easier to understand, and the depth of his compassion for Chol Soo. The articles, Yamada said, made Chol Soo a real person. “And not just a real person that you read about, but somebody like in your own family – or ‘it could be me.’”

The case also awakened what Lee would describe as his “latent Korean identity,” inspiring him to found the English-language *Koreatown Weekly* with Steve Chanecka and Randy Hagihara in 1979, to delve into the stories within the “subculture of Korea Towns in America,” stories “unseen and unknown to the white media.” The paper had a short life, but Lee would follow it up in 1990 as the editor of the *Korea Times English Edition*, which aimed to tell the stories of Korean Americans in their “full human context, warts and all.”

His mission would prove critical. By the early 1990s, Korean Americans, many of whom ran mom-and-pop businesses in America’s neglected inner cities, became identified with the stereotype of the rude, greedy, gun-happy immigrant store owner who failed to get along with their African American neighbors. The phrase “Black-Korean conflict” entered our mainstream news lexicon. One liquor store confrontation led to the tragic shooting death of an African American teenager named Latasha Harlins by Korean immigrant store owner Soon Ja Du.

Through the *Korea Times English Edition*, Lee and his staff tried to provide what he called the “worm’s eye view,” digging for the truth, accurate and balanced, beyond flashy soundbites and

bird's-eye mainstream media accounts that, he said, pitted the two minority communities against each other. The paper documented hundreds of stories of Korean merchants trying to live as "good neighbors." Lee also traded guest editorials with a local African American newspaper, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, as both papers called for calm and bridge building between their communities.

Then, on April 29, 1992, after a jury acquitted the police officers who had been caught on video beating Rodney King, an unarmed African American motorist, the city of Los Angeles exploded in fires, violence and looting. The civil unrest saw the deliberate targeting of Korean-run businesses, which bore a significant brunt of the destruction. The event is remembered by Koreans as "*Saigu*" (literally 4-2-9, the day the unrest started). As the city burned, and his community was under siege, Lee was fighting for his life with a failing liver, but he managed to edit news copies from his hospital bed and pen the thundering editorial titled, "Never Again."

After receiving a life-saving liver transplant, Lee was honored in 1992 with the John Anson Ford Award from the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission. In his acceptance speech, he spoke of the accountability of the media and his belief in the power of stories and accurate, balanced reporting to foster a better society. He also mentioned that his new liver could have come from an African American, Latino or Anglo. "What does it matter? We are all entangled in an unbroken human chain of interdependence and mutual survival," he said. "And what really matters is that we all belong to each other during our earthly passage."

In his so-called retirement years, Lee remained a powerful truth-telling voice, writing commentaries for the *Nichi Bei Weekly* and *KoreAm Journal* magazine that urged readers to heed the lessons of history, from events like the Free Chol Soo Lee movement and Saigu, lecturing at several California universities, and giving inspirational talks at Asian American community events that often lit a fire in yet another generation of young people. With Luke and Grace Kim, he co-produced *Lonesome Journey: The Korean American Century*, an oral history project of early Korean immigrants with an emphasis on women. He also continued to serve as a passionate and generous mentor to many.

One of his longtime mentees, Do Kim, a Los Angeles civil rights attorney, founded the nonprofit organization, The K.W. Lee Center for Leadership, in 2003 as a way to honor Lee, and nurture high school and college students – future leaders – with his principles of truth, justice and community consciousness. His former *Korea Times English Edition* intern Julie Ha co-directed the Emmy-winning documentary *Free Chol Soo Lee*, about the landmark social movement that Lee's articles helped to mobilize. Members of his former staff at the *Korea Times English Edition* paid tribute to Lee's brand of community journalism in the book, *Saigu: Korean and Asian American Journalists Writing Truth to Power*, published by the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. These are just a few legacies of Lee's mentorship, extensions of his exhortation, "Walk with the humblest on earth with humility in steadfast search for the truth."

Lee's deep legacy also lives on in his loving family, whom he used to call his "angel caretakers" that allowed the liver transplant recipient and stomach cancer survivor to live to age 96. And the

ink in his blood and his “full human context” mission may have been passed down to his granddaughter Hanah Cook, who became an Emmy-winning TV writer. Lee used to pay her to write short essays on assigned books and Shakespeare plays when she was a child. The adult Cook wrote an episode of “Mickey Mouse Funhouse,” in which Mickey and his friends travel to South Korea. She said it was inspired by the kids who used to make fun of her seaweed and rice snacks she’d take to school. In the episode, Goofy at first doesn’t want to try Korean food, but then he’s shown how Korean rice cake soup (*tteokguk*) is made, so he might be more open to tasting something new and different. The legacy of K.W. Lee continues.

Lee is survived by his children Shane Lee (Sandee), Sonia Cook (Victor), and Diana Regan (Alan), grandchildren Jacob Lee (Alicia), Jared Lee (Ellie), Hanah Cook, Jackson Cook, Lukas Regan, and Layla Regan, and great grandchildren Orion Lee, Altair Lee and Artemis Lee, as well as many other relatives.

The family has requested that, in lieu of flowers, donations can be made to The K.W. Lee Center for Leadership, at <https://www.kwleecenter.org/>.

Additional quotes, community tributes, and biographical information about K.W. Lee are available upon request.

(Biographical material was written by Julie Ha and Sojin Kim.)