



Big Dreams, Brave Hearts

Twenty-Four Korean American Heroes

Stories for Little Readers



A NetKAL Storybook · Ages 5-7

Maria Hwang

The Brave Mom Who Crossed the Sea

1865-1937 · A founding mother and a kind teacher

Maria Hwang was born in Korea a long, long time ago. She had a big, warm heart. She loved to learn new things.

But back then in Korea, girls and women were not allowed to do many things. Maria could not be all that she dreamed. That made her sad.





So Maria was brave. She wanted a better life for her three children. One day, she took them on a big ship. They sailed and sailed across the wide blue sea, all the way to Hawaii.

In Hawaii, many Korean families worked on the farms. Their children needed a teacher. So Maria taught them! She showed the children how to read and write. She told them about Korea, far away. The children loved her.



Maria saw that the women needed help too. So she started a special club, just for them. It was the very first one in Hawaii! The women came together. They helped each other. They sent help to Korea, their old home.





Maria worked hard all her days. She is one of Korean America's "founding mothers." Because of her, so many families felt safe and strong.

What we can learn: When you are brave and kind, you can help your whole family and many friends too.



Pyeng Koo Yoon

The Man Who Spoke Up for Korea

1880-1949 · A kind minister with a brave heart

Pyeng Koo Yoon was born in Korea a long, long time ago. He loved his home. He loved the green hills and the people there.

When he grew up, he became a minister. A minister is a person who leads a church and helps people. Pyeng Koo helped people get married. He helped people learn. He was always there when they needed him.





One day, he sailed far across the big blue sea. He went to a faraway island called Hawaii. Many Korean families lived and worked there. Pyeng Koo helped them feel at home.

But Pyeng Koo was sad. Back then, Korea was not free. Other people were trying to take it away. He wanted to help his home so much.



So Pyeng Koo did something very brave. He and his friend traveled a long, long way. They went to see the President of the United States! They asked him, very kindly, "Please help Korea. Please be our friend."

The President listened. But he could not help that day. Pyeng Koo felt sad again. Still, he was proud. He had spoken up for the place he loved.





Pyeng Koo never gave up. For the rest of his life, he kept helping. He kept hoping. He kept loving Korea with all his heart.

What we can learn: Be brave and speak up for what you love, even when it is hard.



Park Yong-man

The Dreamer Who Started a Special School on the Prairie

1881-1928 · A big dreamer and a kind teacher

Park Yong-man was born far away in Korea. He loved his home very much. But back then, Korea was not free. Other people were in charge. This made Park's heart hurt.

Park had a big dream. He wanted Korea to be free again. So he sailed all the way across the sea to America. He went to a place called Nebraska. It had wide open fields, tall corn, and cows in the grass.





In Nebraska, Park started a special school. Young Korean men came to learn. They read books. They grew food on the farm. They ran and worked and grew strong. Most of all, they learned to be brave.



Park believed in these young people. "One day," he told them, "you can help Korea." He wanted them to be ready. He wanted them to be smart and kind and strong.





Park worked hard for his dream every single day. Even far from home, he never stopped hoping. He knew that a place you love is always worth caring for.

What we can learn: You can help a place you love, even from far, far away.



Charles Ho Kim

The Fruit Farmer Who Helped His People

1884-1968 · A hard worker with a big, giving heart

Charles Ho Kim was born in Korea a long time ago. He was a teacher there. But Korea was not free, and that made him sad. So he sailed far across the sea to a new home in America.

In America, Charles met a friend. His name was Harry. Together they grew fruit on a big, sunny farm. They grew a smooth, sweet fruit called a nectarine. It is like a peach with no fuzz.





Charles and Harry worked hard, day after day. Their farm grew bigger and bigger. Soon they sold fruit all over. They had lots and lots of money.

But Charles did not keep the money just for himself. He wanted to help. He gave money to build a home for Korean families who were far from Korea. There, they could learn and feel safe.



Charles helped in many ways. He helped Korean families when times were hard. He helped his friends back in Korea, too. He even helped young people go to school. More than six hundred students got his help!

Charles never stopped giving. Even when he was old, he kept building new places to help people. He helped others for the rest of his long life.





Many years later, a school was named after him.
Children still learn there today.

What we can learn: When we are lucky, the kindest thing is to share and help others.



Helen Ahn

The Mom Who Held the Family Together

1884-1969 · A brave mother and a kind helper

A long time ago, Helen Ahn sailed on a big ship. She came all the way from Korea to America. She and her husband were one of the very first Korean couples to come here. The trip was long, and everything was new. But Helen was brave.

Helen and her husband wanted to help Korea. Back then, Korea was not free. Her husband, Dosan, went far away to help. He was gone for a long, long time.





So Helen took care of the home all by herself. She had five children! She washed clothes. She cooked warm rice and kimchi. She gave her children lots of love. She was a strong and loving mom.

Helen made their little house in Los Angeles a happy place. Many Korean friends came to visit. She always had food for them. She listened, and she helped.



Helen also worked with other Korean moms.
They saved their pennies, dollar by dollar, to
help Korea be free. Even a little bit can do a lot
of good.





Helen loved her family and her friends for her whole life. She helped many Korean families feel at home in America.

What we can learn: A loving heart and helping hands can hold a whole family together.



Kim Chong Lim

The Rice Farmer Who Helped Planes Fly

1884-1973 · A hard worker with a big, giving heart

Long ago, a young man named Kim Chong Lim sailed across the big ocean from Korea. He came all the way to America to find a new life.

At first, Kim did not have much money. He worked very hard. He helped build train tracks. The work was long and tiring. But Kim did not give up.





Soon Kim began to grow rice on a farm. He planted and planted. He worked so hard that his farm grew very, very big! People called him the Rice King.

Even when Korea was far away, Kim never forgot it. Korea was not free yet. So Kim shared his money to help. He gave and gave with a happy heart.



One day, a man told Kim, "Someday, airplanes will help our home." So Kim built a flying school. That is a school where people learn to fly planes! He bought planes and paid for everything. Brave young pilots came to learn there.

Then a big flood came and washed Kim's farm away. His money was gone. But Kim was still kind. He still shared what little he had. Later, he even put on a uniform to help his new country, too.





Kim worked hard and gave so much for the rest of his life. People remember him still. Korea even gave him a special honor to say thank you.

What we can learn: Work hard, share what you have, and help others, even when it is not easy.



Harry S. Kim

The Quiet Helper Who Grew Sweet Fruit

1885-1977 · A hard worker and a kind giver

Harry S. Kim was born far away in Korea, a long time ago. He went to school and learned to speak English very well. Then he sailed all the way across the big ocean to America.

Harry came to live in California. The sun was warm. The land was good for growing trees. So Harry planted little baby trees that would grow into big fruit trees one day.





Harry had a good friend named Charles. The two friends grew a special kind of peach. It was smooth and sweet. People came from all over to buy their fruit! Harry and Charles worked together for many, many years and never stopped being friends.

Harry was the quiet one. He did not need everyone to know his name. He just worked hard and helped where he could.



Back then, Harry's home country, Korea, was not free. This made Harry sad. So every year, little by little, he gave his money to help Korea. He also helped young people go to school. He gave and gave for a very long time.





Harry was not loud. But he was steady and kind. He helped people for the rest of his long life.

What we can learn: You do not have to be loud to do big, kind things.



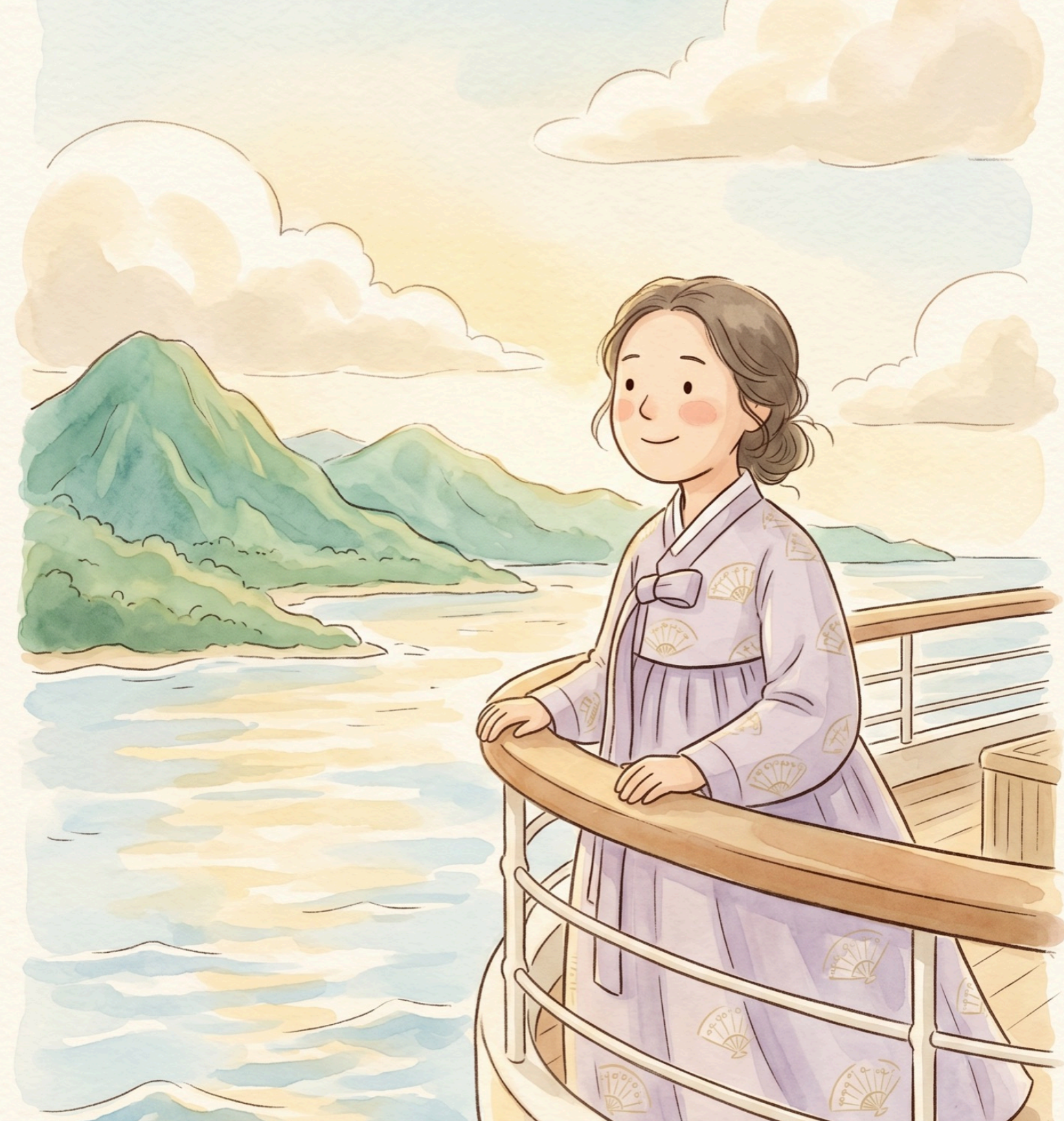
Ha Soo Whang

The Bridge Who Helped Everyone Talk

1892-1984 · A kind helper who brought people together

Ha Soo Whang was born far away in Korea. When she grew up, she traveled across the big ocean. She stopped to visit a place called Hawaii. She liked it so much that she stayed!

Ha Soo could speak two languages. She knew Korean, and she knew English too. That made her a wonderful helper.





Many Korean families came to live in Hawaii. But it was hard to talk to the doctor, the teacher, or the kind neighbor next door. So Ha Soo helped. She was like a bridge. She helped both sides hear each other.

She taught young people about Korea, the home their families came from. She taught grandmas about their new home in Hawaii. She helped everyone learn something new.



Ha Soo loved Korean dance very, very much.
The dances were so beautiful! But there was
one funny thing. Ha Soo could not dance at all!





So she found dancers who could. She helped them dance on a big stage. She told everyone, "Come and see!" People clapped and clapped. And the beautiful dances did not get lost. They were saved for everyone to enjoy.

What we can learn: You can help share something wonderful, even if you cannot do it yourself.



Chung Song Lee Ahn

The Leader Who Brought Women Together

1895-1989 · A kind leader and a helper of friends

Chung Song Lee Ahn was born in Korea a long time ago. She loved to learn. She went to school and grew up to be a teacher.

When she was young, she sailed far across the big blue sea. She came to live in Hawaii. The waves were warm, and the sun was bright. But her heart still loved Korea.





Back then, Korea was not free. Chung Song could not go back home. That made her sad. But she did not give up. She found a wonderful way to help.

In Hawaii, many Korean women lived far from home, just like her. So Chung Song brought them together. She was an organizer. That means she helped people work together to get good things done.



She led group after group. The women met.
They helped each other. They helped their
children grow up strong. And they sent help all
the way to Korea, too.





Year after year, Chung Song kept leading. She was kind and busy and brave. People knew they could always count on her. She built a happy home in Hawaii, full of friends who cared.

What we can learn: When you bring people together to help each other, you make the whole world warmer.



Ilhan New

The Boy Who Crossed the Sea to Help Korea

1895-1971 · A clever helper who never forgot home

When Ilhan New was a little boy, his family sent him far away. He was only nine. He got on a big ship all by himself and sailed across the ocean to America.

A kind family took him in. Ilhan was very brave. He went to school. He played football. And he worked hard every single day.





When he grew up, Ilhan had a clever idea. He started a company that made food from tiny bean sprouts. A company is a group of people who work together. People loved the food! Soon Ilhan had lots and lots of money.

But Ilhan missed Korea. Back then, Korea was not free. The people there were sick and sad. Ilhan wanted to help. So he sailed home and started a new company that made medicine. Medicine helps sick people feel better. It was the very first one in all of Korea!



Ilhan was also very brave for his country. He learned to be a soldier. He wanted to help make Korea free again. That took a big, brave heart.





Ilhan never kept all his money for himself. He built warm places for his workers. He started schools for children. He gave away almost everything he had, so other people could have a better life.

What we can learn: When you work hard and share what you have, you can help people far and near.



Nodie Sohn

The Little Girl Who Grew Up to Lead a School

1898-1972 · A teacher, a leader, and a friend to many

Nodie Sohn was born far away in Korea. When she was only six years old, she went on a big boat. The boat sailed all the way to Hawaii. Hawaii has sunny beaches and tall green hills.

Back then, Korea was not free. Many families had to leave home. Nodie's family wanted to help Korea, even from far away. So they did kind things for other Korean families in Hawaii.





Nodie loved school. She read books and worked hard. She went to a big college and learned so much. Then she came right back to Hawaii to help children, too.



When Nodie was just twenty, she became a principal. A principal is the leader of a school! She was the very first Korean woman to lead a school in Hawaii. That was a big, big deal.





Nodie taught children to read and to dream. She helped Korean families feel happy and safe. People knew they could ask her for help. She was a strong and kind leader for a long, long time.

What we can learn: Work hard, be kind, and you can grow up to help many people.



Mary Paik Lee

The Girl Who Remembered

1900-1995 · A brave girl who wrote her story down

Mary Paik Lee was a little girl in Korea. When she was five, her family got on a big ship. They sailed all the way to a new land called America.

Mary's family did not have much money. They worked very hard. They picked fruit in the hot sun. They lived in small homes. Everyone helped, even little Mary.





Mary was new here. She looked different from the other kids. Some children were not kind to her. But Mary stayed brave. And Mary stayed kind herself.

Mary grew up. She got married. She raised three boys. She worked hard her whole life, just like her mom and dad.



When Mary was old, she did something special. She wrote a book about her life. She called it "Quiet Odyssey." (An author is someone who writes books. Now Mary was an author too!)





Mary wrote so we would always remember. She told about the very first Korean families in America. She told what they saw, and how hard they worked. Because of Mary, their story is not lost.

What we can learn: Your story matters, so be brave and tell it.



Philip Ahn

The Boy Who Followed His Dream to the Movies

1905-1978 · The first Korean American movie star

Philip Ahn was born in Los Angeles a long time ago. His mom and dad came from Korea. They loved Korea very much. They worked hard to help their faraway home.

Philip had a big dream. He wanted to be an actor. An actor is someone who pretends to be other people in movies and shows. Philip thought that would be so much fun!





So Philip went to school to learn how to act. He practiced and practiced. He wanted to be the very best.

Soon Philip was in the movies! He was the first Korean American to act in Hollywood, where many movies are made. He was in so many films. Some he made you laugh. Some he made you think.



But things were not always fair. Sometimes Philip was only allowed to play certain parts. Some people were not kind to him. That made Philip sad. But he did not give up. He kept acting, and he opened the door for other people to follow their dreams too.

Philip also opened a restaurant. Families came to eat together and feel happy.





Philip became famous all over. He got a special gold star on the ground in Hollywood, called the Walk of Fame. It tells everyone, "This person did something wonderful." Philip was the first Asian American actor to get one.

What we can learn: Follow your dream, even when it is hard, and you can open the door for others.



Susan Ahn Cuddy

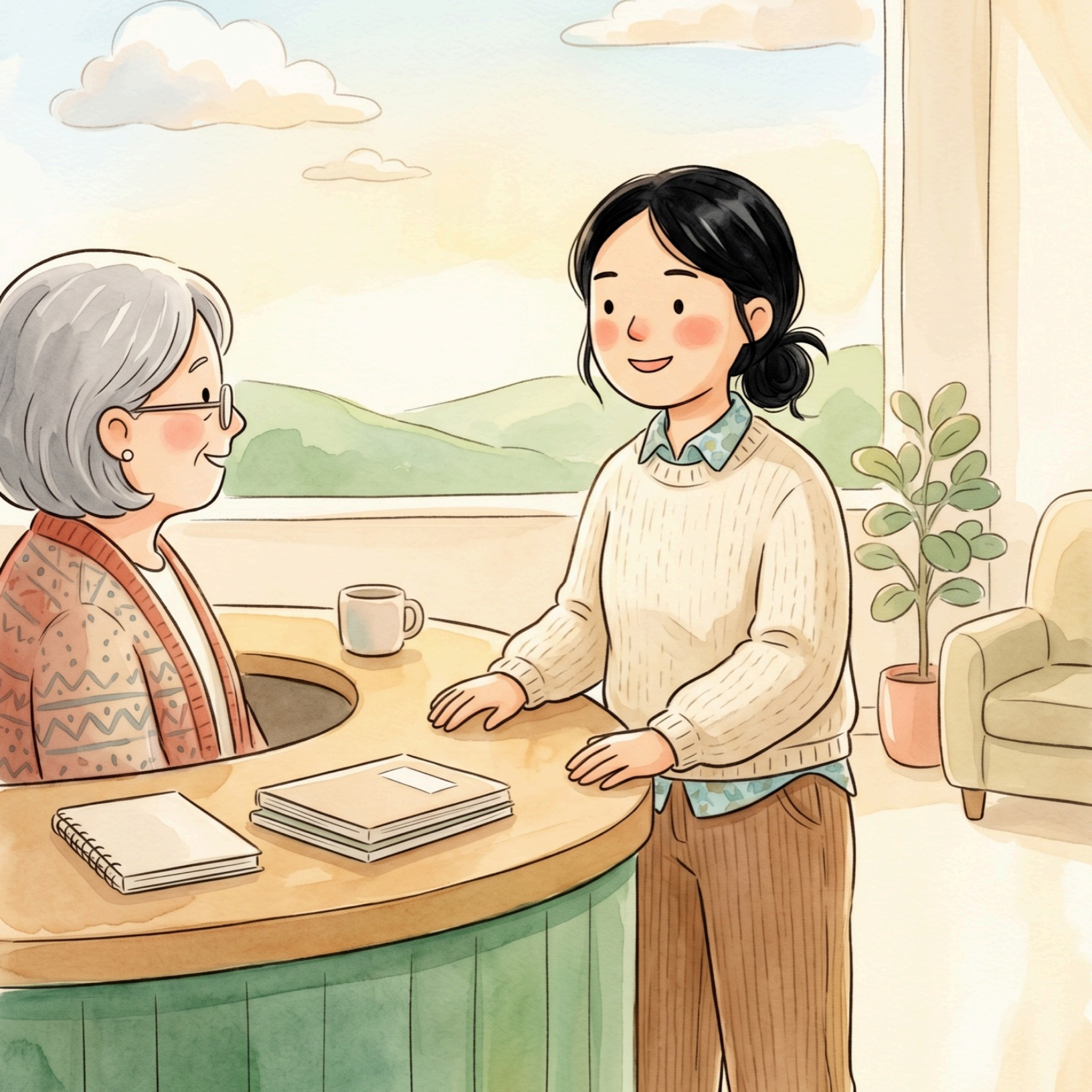
The First Asian American Woman in the Navy

1915-2015 · A brave sailor and a smart helper

Susan Ahn Cuddy was born in Los Angeles a long time ago. Her mom and dad came from Korea. Her dad was a famous hero named Dosan. He taught his family to be brave and to help others.

Susan loved baseball. She ran and played and was very good. At her school, she was the first Asian American girl to play on the team!





When Susan grew up, her country needed help. She wanted to join the Navy. The Navy is a group of sailors who keep their country safe on big ships at sea.

But some people said no. They said she could not join, just because of where her family came from. That was not fair. It made Susan sad. But she remembered to be brave. So she asked again. And this time, they said yes!



Susan became the very first Asian American woman in the whole Navy. She was so smart that she became a teacher. She taught grown-ups in the Navy. She was so clever that she even helped solve secret puzzles, like a real-life code. Codes are tricky messages hidden like a game.





Susan was brave. Susan was smart. And because she did not give up, she opened the door for other girls to follow her.

What we can learn: When someone says no, be brave and try again.



Herbert Choy

The First to Wear the Robe

1916–2004 · A hard worker and a fair judge

Herbert Choy was born on a big farm in Hawaii. His mom and dad came from Korea. They worked all day in the hot sun, picking tall sugar plants. It was very hard work.

Herbert worked hard too. He loved to learn. He went to school, and then he went to college far away from home. He read many books. He studied and studied, late into the night. He wanted to help people follow the rules in a fair way.





A judge is someone who helps people be fair and follow the rules. Herbert became a lawyer first. He was the very first Korean American lawyer in all of America! No one like him had done it before.

Then something big happened. Herbert became a judge. He was the first Asian American judge in his kind of court. He wore a special robe that no one like him had ever worn.



Being first is not always easy. But Herbert was quiet and kind. He was honest. He listened well, and he was always fair.





Herbert was a judge for a long, long time. He did his job every single day. He showed up, he listened, and he helped people for many years.

What we can learn: Work hard, be fair, and show up every day, even when you are the very first to try.



David Hyun

The Man Who Built a Happy, Welcoming Place

1917-2012 · A dreamer who drew beautiful buildings

David Hyun was born far away, in Korea. When he was little, his family moved to a new home across the ocean. David loved to look at tall buildings. He loved to draw them too. He drew big ones and small ones.

When David grew up, he became an architect. An architect is someone who draws and plans beautiful buildings. David was the very first Korean American architect. That means he was the first one ever!





Sometimes people were not fair to David. They did not understand him. That made him sad. But David's friends helped him, and David did not give up. He kept drawing and planning.

One day, David got a big job. He planned a special place called Japanese Village Plaza. It is in a part of the city called Little Tokyo. It has a tall red tower and many little shops.



People love Japanese Village Plaza! They walk there. They shop there. They smile there. David made it just for them.





David believed every building should feel like a warm hug. He wanted his buildings to say, "Welcome! Come in!" He wanted them to bring people close together.

What we can learn: When we make things with love, we help people feel welcome and bring them together.



Fred Ohr

The Boy Who Dreamed of Flying

1919-2015 · A brave pilot and a kind dentist

Fred Ohr was born a long time ago. His family came from Korea. They lived on a small farm in Idaho. Their home was just a little tent. They had no money for big machines. So they worked the land with their hands. The work was hard, but Fred was happy. He loved his family. He loved the wide blue sky over the farm.





One day, when Fred was six, a small airplane flew over the farm. Fred looked up and smiled. He watched it fly far away. "I want to fly an airplane too!" he said.

His mom said something wise. "If you want it badly enough, it will come true."

When Fred grew up, some people said he could not be a pilot. That was not fair. It made Fred sad. But he kept trying and trying. At last, he got to fly!



Fred became a wonderful pilot. He was very, very good at it. In the war, he flew high in the sky in his fast airplane. He was brave. He helped keep his friends safe.





When the war was over, Fred came home. He married a kind woman named Esther. Then Fred learned a brand new job. He became a dentist! A dentist helps keep teeth healthy. Fred helped people smile for many, many years.

What we can learn: Hold tight to your dream, and one day it can come true.



Young Oak Kim

The Soldier Who Said, "We Are All the Same"

1919-2005 · A brave soldier and a kind helper

Young Oak Kim was born in Los Angeles a long time ago. His mom and dad came from Korea. They did not have much money. They worked hard every day in a little grocery store.

When Young Oak grew up, he wanted to be a soldier. But some people told him no. They said he was not the right kind of person, just because of where his family came from. That was not fair. It made Young Oak sad. But he did not give up.



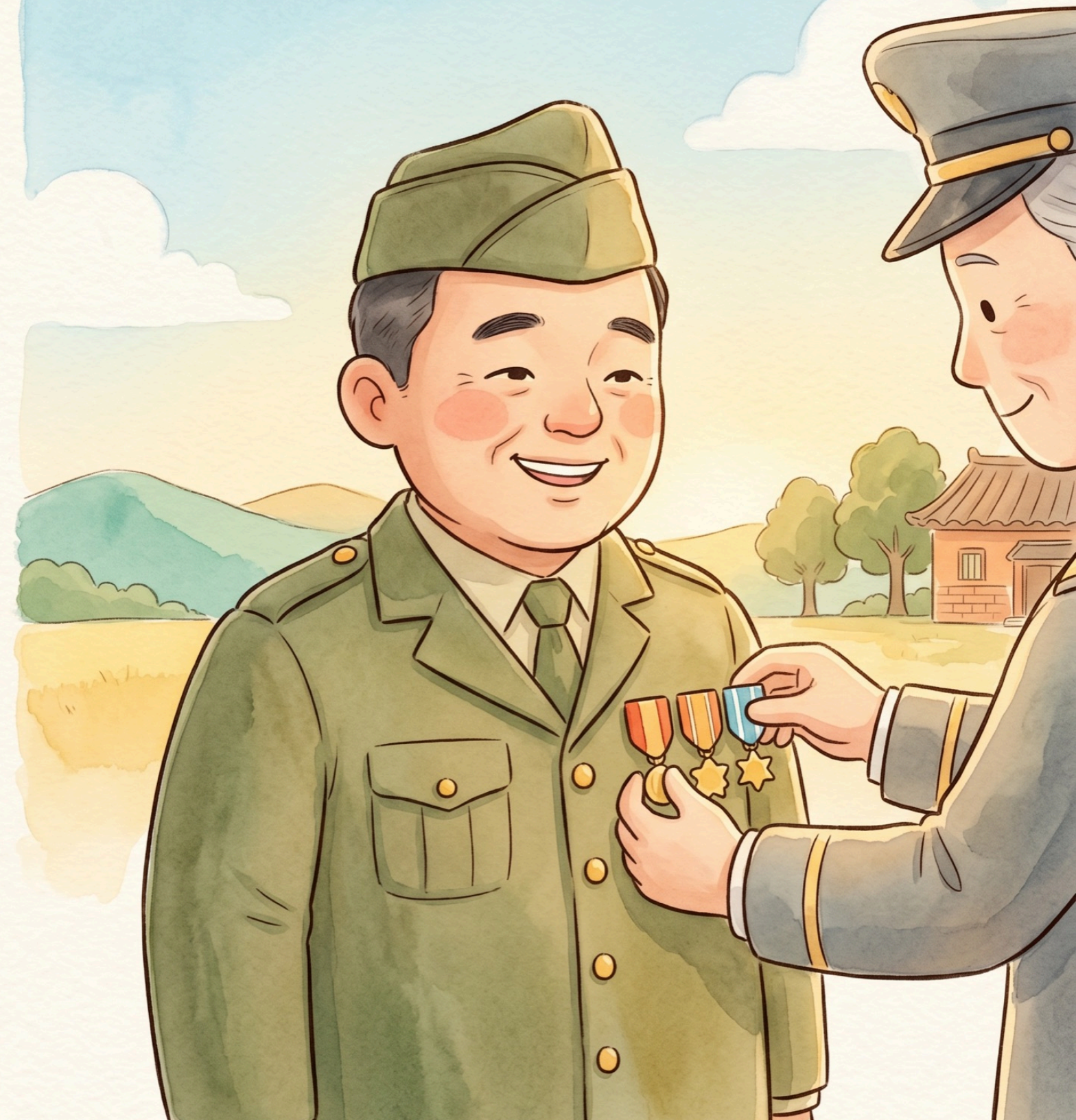


One day, his country needed soldiers, and Young Oak finally got to join. The army put him with soldiers whose families came from Japan. Back then, Japan and Korea were not friends. Someone asked Young Oak, "Do you want to leave?"

Young Oak shook his head. "No," he said. "We are all Americans. We are all the same." So he stayed, and they became a team.



Young Oak was brave and smart. He kept his friends safe, and he won many, many medals for his courage.





When Young Oak grew older, he stopped being a soldier. But he never stopped helping. He built special places in Los Angeles where Korean families could find food, learn new things, and feel safe. He helped people for the rest of his life.

What we can learn: Be kind to everyone, even when others are not. On the inside, we are all the same.



Dora Yum Kim

The Helper Who Found Jobs for New Friends

1921-2003 · A kind helper who made families feel welcome

Dora Yum Kim was born a long time ago in San Francisco. Her mom and dad came from Korea. They worked hard in their little restaurant. Dora helped them every day.

When Dora grew up, she wanted to work too. But some people said no. They would not give her a job, just because of where her family came from. That was not fair. It made Dora sad. But she did not give up.





Dora found a job at a big office that helped people find work. She learned a lot there. And she could speak Korean too!

Soon, many new families came to America from Korea. They needed jobs. But it was hard. They did not know where to start. So Dora helped them, one by one.



"Come with me," Dora would say with a smile. She found jobs for them. She helped more than three thousand people! That is a lot of new friends.

Dora also helped start a special place. It was a friendly place where Korean families could get help. They could learn English. They could share warm meals. They felt safe. They felt welcome.





Dora helped people her whole life. She made America feel like home.

What we can learn: When you help others feel welcome, you make the whole world kinder.



K. W. Lee

The Reporter Who Used Words to Help

1928-2025 · A kind reporter and a teller of true stories

K. W. Lee was born in Korea a long, long time ago. When he grew up, he came all the way to America. He had a big dream. He wanted to be a reporter.

What is a reporter? A reporter finds true stories. Then they tell them to everyone in the newspaper. K. W. Lee loved doing this.





He worked very hard and asked many questions. He listened to people that others did not always hear. Then he wrote down the truth so that everyone could read it.

One day, a man was in trouble for something he did not do. That was not fair. K. W. Lee told the man's story again and again. He wrote it so people would listen. And it helped set things right!



K. W. Lee also started newspapers for Korean American families. Now they had their own stories to read. He helped young reporters learn, too. He taught them to find the truth and tell it with care.





People call him a hero of Korean American newspapers. He used his words to help, and that made the world a little kinder.

What we can learn: Telling the truth and helping others is a brave and beautiful thing to do.



Luke Ik Chang Kim

The Doctor Who Helped Feelings Feel Better

1930-2015 · A kind doctor and a caring friend

Luke Kim was born far away, in Korea. When Luke was a boy, his country had a hard time. There was a war. People felt scared and sad. Luke felt sad too. But he was brave, and he kept going.

Luke loved school. He studied and studied. He became a doctor! But Luke was a special kind of doctor. He did not fix sore tummies. He helped feelings.





Some people feel sad. Some feel scared. Some feel worried. Luke helped those people feel better. He listened with his whole heart.

Luke had a big idea. People come from many places all over the world. And people from different places feel things in different ways. Luke said, "To help someone, I must learn where they come from." He was one of the first doctors to help this way.



Luke was gentle and warm. He cared about everyone. He even helped a young man who needed a friend, when no one else would.





For all his life, Luke helped people feel safe and happy inside.

What we can learn: When we take time to understand each other, we can help everyone feel better.



Dae-Sook Suh

The Teacher Who Helped America Learn About Korea

1931-2022 · A kind teacher and a curious scholar

Dae-Sook Suh was born in Korea a long time ago. When he was young, his home changed. It was not safe to stay. So he had to leave the place he was born. That was very hard. But he was brave, and he kept going.

When Dae-Sook grew up, he had one big love. He loved to learn! He loved books. He loved asking questions. He wanted to know all about Korea, his home. So he read and read, and he learned more each day.





Dae-Sook became a scholar. A scholar is someone who studies one thing very deeply and shares what they learn. He studied Korea for many, many years. He never got tired of it.

One day, Dae-Sook had a big idea. He thought, "Students in America should learn about Korea too!" So he started the very first big Korean Studies center at a school in Hawaii. It was the first one of its kind. Now lots of students could learn about Korea right there.



Dae-Sook also wrote important books. His books helped people all over the world understand Korea. He taught and taught, and he shared all that he knew with kind, gentle words.





Dae-Sook never stopped learning, and he never stopped sharing.

What we can learn: When you love to learn, you can share that gift with the whole world.



Hi Duk Lee

The Man Who Built a Home for Korea in Los Angeles

1939-2019 · A hard worker and a big dreamer

Hi Duk Lee grew up on a farm in Korea. He worked hard and learned a lot. When he was a young man, he went far away to find a new life.

He worked deep in a coal mine. There he met a kind nurse named Kil Ja. They fell in love. Then they sailed all the way to Los Angeles, a big city in America.





In their new city, Hi Duk missed home. He missed Korean food. He missed seeing Korean words on the signs. Only a few Korean families lived there, and they had no place that felt like home.

So Hi Duk had a big dream. He worked many jobs. He saved his money for a long time. Then he opened a market. A market is a store that sells food. It was the very first Korean store in the city!



Hi Duk wanted more. He built a pretty restaurant with a Korean roof. He brought the shiny roof tiles all the way from Korea. More and more Korean families came. They opened shops too. Soon there was a whole neighborhood, a part of the city just for them. It was called Koreatown!

Things did not always work out for Hi Duk. Some of his big plans did not last. But he was not sad for long. He helped many people feel at home, and that made him happy.





When he grew older, Hi Duk planted a garden full of green plants. He smiled and said, "My happy garden grew from all my hard work."

What we can learn: When you work hard and share, you can build a home where everyone feels welcome.



Yong Soon Min

The Artist Who Told Big Stories with Her Art

1953-2024 · A brave artist and a kind teacher

Yong Soon Min was born in a small village in Korea. When she was a little girl, her family moved far away to America. That was a big trip to a brand-new home. Yong Soon grew up to be an artist. An artist makes pictures and art to share feelings and ideas. Yong Soon loved to make art most of all.





She made art about being Korean and about being American. She made art about home, and about the people and places she remembered. Her art helped people feel and think.

Korea was split into two parts, and that made Yong Soon's heart hurt. So she made art about it. She wanted people to remember and to care.



Yong Soon helped other artists, too. Long ago, many Asian American artists did not have a place to show their work. So Yong Soon helped build new places for them. Now they could be seen and cheered.

She also became a teacher. She listened to her students. She told them their ideas were good and important.





Yong Soon showed the whole world that art can tell big, important stories.

What we can learn: Your art and your ideas matter, and you can help others shine too.





About These Heroes

Every hero in this book was a **real person**. Long ago, the first Korean families sailed across a wide ocean to a new home. They were farmers and soldiers, teachers and artists, dreamers and doers. Korea was not free then, so they did two brave things at once: they built new lives here, and they helped their old home, too.

Because of them, Korean American children today have schools to learn in, a community to grow up in, and stories to be proud of. They opened doors – and left them open for you.

Maybe one day, someone will tell a story about *you*.

Created for the NetKAL Korean American storytelling project. With love, for the next generation. 🌱