

‘I’m excited for my first visit to my homeland with my family as a father rather than a soldier’

Stephen Curda, first Korean American to serve as general in U.S. Army, is professor at National Louis University in the U.S.

Stephen Curda (65, Korean name: Choi Gab-san), a professor of educational engineering at National Louis University, is the first Korean American adoptee to become a U.S. Army general. He traveled to South Korea with his family as an adoptee representative to attend the opening ceremony of the Mother's Embrace Garden in Paju, Gyeonggi Province, a "space for memory and healing" for overseas adoptees.

Born in 1960 in Iri (now Iksan), North Jeolla Province, and raised in Seoul, he was adopted to the United States at age 10. After graduating from the University of Arkansas, he joined the army as an officer and served as a platoon leader, company commander and operations officer in the U.S. Army's 2nd Division.

He then served as an adviser for the 350th Civil Affairs Command and a professor at the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) before being promoted to brigadier general in 2012 and serving three years as commander of the 351st Civil Affairs Command, which performs missions, such as warfare, medical aid and facility support. In 2015, he was appointed commander of the 9th Mission Support Group (MSG), which provides civil affairs, transportation and training support for U.S. military units stationed in the Asia-Pacific region, including U.S. forces in Japan and Guam.

Even in the U.S., it's rare for a soldier to reach the rank of general. With a 0.06 percent chance, it is considered almost impossible. To achieve this as an adoptee makes this all the more special. He has led a life similar to the main character in Mr. Sunshine, Eugene Choi, and served in both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

"My time as commander of the 9th Mission Support Command in support of U.S. forces in Korea and my tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan were some of the most rewarding and proudest times of my military career," he said.

While in the military, Curda attended graduate school

Professor Stephen Curda, the first Korean American to serve as a U.S. Army general



and earned a doctorate in educational psychology. After retiring from the Army in 2018, Curda was appointed secretary of veterans affairs for the state of Illinois and also served as a professor at Florida State University.

His wife, Leslie Curda, is also a professor at the University of San Diego, and together they have one son and four daughters. "This was my first trip back to my roots with my children as a father rather than a soldier," he said. "And it was a valuable opportunity to show them the culture and history of Korea firsthand."

He also has some advice for younger adoptees. "The first thing is faith. Faith in God makes a lot of things possible. Second is hard work. Whatever you do, you have to work hard and do your best. Third is education. There is no substitute for education."

When asked about the secret to his success, he was quick to point out that he "never lost the Korean spirit that runs through his veins."

"Just like our people who made something out of nothing in the 1960s and 70s and created the miracle of the Han River, I tried to do my best in everything I did. There were many difficult moments, but I tried to see them not just as pain, but as doors to new opportunities," Curda said.

Another key to his success is the power of family. "Above all, my wife and children have always believed in me and supported me. I think my success is a combination of hard work, luck and blessings from the heavens." 

