

‘The time is right to foster next generation; second and third Andy Kims will keep coming’

‘OKA should be eyes and ears of Korean community around the world’

“It’s time to make a bold investment in second-generation Koreans. Based on the hard work and dedication of the first generation who settled in the U.S., a new generation of leaders is emerging who are distinguishing themselves in all areas of politics, economics and society. Supporting them is an investment in the future of Korea, and when we do, the second and third Andy Kims will keep coming.”

In a recent interview in Seoul, Kang Seok-hee, president of the International Foundation for Korea University, who was the first first-generation Korean American to be elected to multiple terms as the mayor of Irvine, California, made serious recommendations for expanding the role of the Overseas Koreans Agency, the new administration’s strategy for U.S.-Korea relations and the empowerment of overseas Koreans.

“As an organization that was born from the long-standing wishes of the 7 million overseas Koreans around the world, the OKA should not just be an administrative body but the eyes and ears of the global Korean community,” he said.

“We need to put structures in place to ensure that their voices are heard and that they are reflected in actual policies. This starts with building a network of dedicated Korean leaders in each region. For example, those connected to mainstream society can serve as a conduit for collecting and communicating opinions.”

He is also firm in his views on the U.S.-Korea alliance. “South Korea and the U.S. have shared blood in a close alliance for the past 75 years,” he said. “While regime change may change the way we view the U.S., the key is to maintain trust.

“There may be policy disagreements between the two countries. However, we need to narrow the differences through sincere dialogue and cooperation, and develop a win-win diplomatic strategy. The U.S.-South Korea relationship has a major impact on South Korea’s international standing across diplomacy, economy and security.”

“More than 2 million Koreans in the U.S. are active in their communities, and they are not just emigrants; they are human assets for South Korea,” he said. “The Korean government must



Kang Seok-hee and his family pose for a photo at Stanley Park during a recent trip to Vancouver, Canada.

provide real support to help them become mainstreamed into American society.”

‘Korea is an advanced economy, but there is still some way to go in our consciousness’

Kang also pointed to the issue of voting rights for overseas Koreans in the United States.

“The United States is a large country, and it is not uncommon to have to travel hundreds of kilometers to a polling station. The current system is too impractical. It needs to be improved in various ways to encourage active voting participation, such as through mail-in ballots.”

He emphasized that improving the voting system is more than just protecting rights but an essential device to foster a sense of national identity and belonging among overseas compatriots.

During his tenure as mayor of Irvine, Kang also received



Kang Seok-hee, president of the International Foundation for Korea University, discusses the U.S. political system and the role of overseas Koreans during a recent interview in Seoul.

overwhelming support from conservative white voters.

“Politicians need to humble themselves and look from the perspective of citizens. I spent every Wednesday talking directly to citizens, and I ran my city government by listening to every voice in the community.”

He cites the public comment system as a strength of the American political system.

“There is an institutionalized culture where citizens can speak freely for three minutes at city council meetings, and the mayor and council members must listen. It’s a system that normalizes civic engagement and builds trust in politics.”

‘Politics is about serving, not fighting. We need inclusive leadership’

As an immigrant, Kang has experienced South Korea’s remarkable progress firsthand.

“Forty-eight years ago, I immigrated with the American dream. Looking back, it was a hard life, but the economic achievements that Korea has made today are remarkable. However, I think there is still a lot of room for improvement on

the software side, such as civic consciousness and political culture.”

He points out that bridging the gap between the economic hardware and the software of civic engagement is now the challenge Korea must face to join the ranks of the developed world, and it starts with politicians.

To conclude the interview, he had a special message for second-generation Koreans.

“You can grow into confident leaders in American society while maintaining your Korean identity. It’s time for you to build your future on the foundation your parents have laid.

“I plan to actively engage in human resource development and exchange programs that connect Korea and the world,” said Kang, who also began serving as chairman of the International Foundation for Korea University this year. “I will continue to do my best to build bridges between the Korean American community in the United States and my home country.”

Kang is the first first-generation Korean American to serve as an elected mayor of the U.S. He crossed the Pacific Ocean in 1977 after graduating from Korea University to follow his older brother, who was the first to go to the U.S., in pursuit of the American dream. He got a job as a salesman at Circuit City, an electronics store, and with his characteristic politeness and sincerity, he became the top salesman within four months of his arrival and the first Asian to become a manager.

As an ordinary immigrant living in the United States, it was during the 1992 Los Angeles riots that he decided to contribute to the Korean American community. He realized that the lack of response to the riots was due to the lack of political influence of Korean Americans, as Korean businesses were heavily damaged, and in 1993, he became active in the Korean American community as a board member of the Korean Heritage Scholarship Foundation. Through his work with the Federation of Korean Associations USA and the Korean Heritage Scholarship Foundation, he helped Korean Americans enter the mainstream of American society, and in 2004, he was approached by the Korean American community to run for the Irvine City Council. After much deliberation, he accepted the challenge and spent five to six hours a day canvassing the neighborhoods during the campaign, visiting more than 20,000 homes, and was elected by white conservative voters who recognized his passion and authenticity.

After earning the trust of his constituents by delivering on his promises as a city councilor, he ran for mayor of Irvine in 2008. He was reelected in 2010 with the highest percentage of the vote (64.1 percent) in Irvine’s history. 🇺🇸