

## Exemplifies K-spirit of rising like a phoenix from homelessness to caring for children

'Measure of success lies not in money or flashy titles but in contributing to community'

"K-pop is a powerful cultural bridge connecting the world. Behind it lies the K-spirit -- a history of diligence, overcoming adversity and revival. It is the Korean spirit that rises like a phoenix from hardship."

Patricia Lee (50), a justice on the Nevada Supreme Court in the United States, who visited Korea to attend the 11th World Korean Politicians Forum organized by the Overseas Koreans Cooperation Center (Director Kim Young-geun), spoke about the K-spirit spreading globally via the bridge laid by K-pop during an interview with Yonhap News Agency at Seoul's Daeil Foreign Language High School on the afternoon of Sept. 9.

Born in Jeonju, North Jeolla Province, to an African American father serving in the U.S. military in Korea and a Korean mother, Justice Lee is Nevada's first Asian African American Supreme Court justice. She is an iconic figure of the K-spirit, having risen to the highest judicial position after enduring a long tunnel of hardship, including being a child head of household, homelessness and abuse.

### 'I studied fiercely to avoid living like my parents'

Justice Lee's childhood, after moving to the U.S. at age 4, was a series of hardships. Around age 8, her parents divorced due to her father's alcoholism. Afterwards, she cared for her two younger siblings in place of her mother, who struggled with English, and first encountered the law through a basic livelihood security application form. They were evicted for unpaid rent and moved between shelters for abused women. At 15, unable to endure her stepfather's abuse, she ran away from home and survived by moving between friends' houses.

Despite these hardships, she served as both student body president and cheerleading captain in high school, graduating at the top of her class. She went on to double major in psychology and communication at the University of Southern California (USC), then pursued law at George Washington University Law School, embarking on a career in the legal profession.

"I studied fiercely, afraid I might end up like my parents or



Nevada Supreme Court Justice Patricia Lee delivers a special lecture at Daeil Foreign Language High School in Seoul on Sept. 9.

disappoint the adults who helped me," she said.

She credited as her lifeline both her friends who generously offered help and the federal Upward Bound Program, designed for low-income youth. The program provided subject-specific tutoring, advanced learning during vacations and college entrance exam preparation.

"This is why I could go to college without my parents' help," she said. "One person's compassion and society's institutional support can change someone's life."

### 'Wearing 'hanbok' on Changgyeong Palace night tour was unforgettable memory'

As a practicing lawyer, she cited providing free legal services through pro bono work to help those in need as her greatest source of fulfillment. She won a lawsuit challenging a military regulation that automatically handed over the remains of an unmarried soldier killed in Afghanistan to the older parent among divorced parents. As a result, the military regulation was amended so that the remains of unmarried soldiers are now handed over to the parent whom the soldier designates.

"Since that day, pro bono has been my lifelong mission," she said.



Justice Patricia Lee of the Nevada Supreme Court is interviewed by Yonhap News Agency.



Patricia Lee wears "hanbok" during her childhood.

Her primary clients were vulnerable individuals: children suffering domestic violence, low-income families on the brink of bankruptcy and those needing to sue large corporations. For this work, she became the inaugural recipient of the American Bar Association's Pro Bono Award in 2013.

Regarding the World Korean Politicians Forum, she expressed gratitude to the Overseas Koreans Cooperation Center for the invitation.

"A forum connecting overseas Korean politicians and youth from diverse backgrounds is truly a platform for change," she said. "Visiting cultural heritage sites like the Gyeongbok and Changgyeong palaces and experiencing wearing hanbok are unforgettable memories and deeply moving. I hope more Korean politicians will participate in this forum going forward."

### Importance of embracing perspectives different from one's own

Regarding Korea's political situation, she said: "The resilience of Koreans is historically unparalleled. They have successfully overcome recent political and social difficulties and will continue to do so."

What is the standard of success for the accomplished Justice Lee?

"It's not about money or flashy titles. It depends on contributing to the community." She elaborated that how society treats the vulnerable defines its character. "Making the world a slightly better place, upholding integrity and sincerity in one's work, and passing those values on to the next generation -- that is true success."

She also addressed the future in the age of artificial intelligence (AI).

"Unverified reliance on AI is dangerous because it can fabricate fiction as fact," she warned. "Persuading jurors ultimately requires human empathy. AI should be a complement, not a substitute."

Lee concluded the interview with one final remark: "Be nice. We must be kinder to one another."

She delivered a special lecture at Seoul Daeil Foreign Language High School prior to the interview that day.

Her message to the students was summarized in five words: resilience, tenacity, passion, compassion and integrity.

"It takes a lifetime to build a reputation, but it can be destroyed in a second," she said. "Maintain honesty and transparency, and cherish your reputation."

### Journaling is support when things get tough

In explaining her principles around communication, she said she always speaks with colleagues in this way: "This is my perspective. What do you think? Don't try to give me the answer I want to hear -- just share your honest opinion."

She added, "It's crucial to have an attitude that accepts perspectives different from mine, humbly listens to critical opinions and acknowledges that my own thoughts might be wrong."

She also shared that her main source of support during tough times is journaling. Putting negative emotions down on paper helps release them. She then emphasized, "The worst thing is making excessive promises you can't keep," stressing the importance of keeping commitments.

She concluded her lecture by quoting Helen Keller's famous words: "The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision. Life gains meaning when you establish a vision for your future and move forward." 장