

‘A final deep bow to Korean War veterans. Our respect will continue’

‘Vision for K-bridge: honoring veterans, settlement support, cultural diplomacy’;
model of public diplomacy integrated with local community

“Though it was a deep bow at the last official service event, our gratitude and respect will not cease. Only the form will change.”

Ko Jung-mi (64), president of the Waikato Korean Association, leading a community of about 2,000 Koreans in Hamilton, North Island, New Zealand, said this in an interview with Yonhap News while reflecting on the June 29 event commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Korean War.

The Waikato region’s veterans’ service event, Peace Sunday, began in 1997. Once attended by over 30 veterans, only five remain today. Considering their advanced age, this year marked the final official event.

Visiting her homeland to attend the 2025 World Korean Association Conference hosted by the Overseas Koreans Agency, she pledged, “The Korean people’s spirit of gratitude will continue to spread wider and deeper.”

The final event was attended by approximately 150 people, including 12 veterans and bereaved family members, as well as Koreans and locals.

“When veteran Brian recited ‘Memories of a 15-Year-Old Boy Soldier,’ everyone fell silent in solemn respect,” Ko said. “The emotion of that day was not just a simple event but a scene proving the Korean spirit of gratitude.”

All-in-one service that helped overcome the COVID crisis

Since its establishment in 1995, the Waikato Korean Association has served as a steadfast pillar supporting Korean settlement and daily life.

“The association is not merely a protective barrier for Koreans alone but a bridge walking side by side with the local community,” Ko said. “Honoring veterans, providing settlement support, public services and cultural exchange form the three pillars of our activities.”

The association’s resilience shone brightly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2020, it collaborated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the OKA to secure a special Korean Air flight for Koreans and international students stranded from returning home.

“The greatest sense of fulfillment came when I heard the association had proven its raison d’être during the crisis,” she said.



Ko Jung-mi, president of the Korean Association of Waikato, New Zealand

Support for Korean settlement was systematized through the All-in-One Information Day.

“Koreans greatly appreciate being able to handle consular affairs, legal, accounting, medical and psychological counseling all in one day without having to go to Auckland,” Ko said. “Multicultural settlement ultimately means lowering barriers.”

Bridging generations with K Silver Meeting and community care

Thoughtful consideration for the aging Korean community also



Ko Jung-mi moves hearts by bowing deeply to veterans and expressing gratitude during the final veterans' appreciation event on June 29.



After the Peace Sunday event honoring veterans at the 75th anniversary commemoration of the Korean War held in Hamilton, New Zealand, on June 29, President Ko Jung-mi (6th from L in back row) poses for a commemorative photo with veterans.

stands out. The monthly K-Silver Meeting is a flagship program for seniors.

"On the last Thursday of every month, we host a gathering where seniors dine together and share health tips. Hearing them say they don't feel lonely in their immigrant life gives me great satisfaction," Ko said.

Additionally, the association provides free meals at least once a week for vulnerable compatriots, hosts the Haecho-mom gathering for young parents, offers after-school activities for youth, and operates a cultural center teaching free Korean language and computer classes, English courses and paper folding.

"An everyday platform that bridges generations and social classes is the true strength of the Korean community," she said.

The annual K-Festival is a symbolic event for exchanges with the local community. It features traditional arts stages like bulgogi and bibimbap experiences, kimchi-making, K-pop contests, "gayageum" and fan dance performances, paper folding and "hanbok" fashion shows, attracting over 500 local participants.

"I experienced Korean food with my whole body while tasting kimchi made by locals," Ko said. "Cultural diplomacy doesn't have to be grand; it begins with sharing a meal and laughter together. Koreans living overseas must engage with locals. Only by paying taxes in their host countries and contributing to those nations' prosperity can they truly shine on the global stage."

The Korean Association has built community trust by launching various free programs with support from Hamilton City Council, the OKA and New Zealand government funds.

"The core is trust and transparency. Even starting small, if you build records and trust, government support naturally follows." Ko said.

Ko's service record shines particularly brightly in the educational field. For 24 years since 2000, she served as a teacher, vice principal and principal at the Waikato Korean School, dedicating herself to educating the next generation in Korean language,

history, culture and identity. She also co-founded and chaired both the New Zealand Hangeul School Council and the Oceania Hangeul School Council, and served as a representative for the World Hangeul School Council. She currently serves as the Overseas Teachers' Association President for the Korean Language Society.

"Hangeul, history and cultural education are fundamental. But now we must add projects that engage with the local community. Teachers are the infrastructure of hope."

Additionally, as vice president of the Waikato Multicultural Association, she consistently participates in multicultural festivals wearing hanbok, promoting Korean culture.

"I feel most proud when locals understand Korea through hanbok."

Recipient of New Zealand's Queen's Service Medal

For her contributions, Ko has received the New Zealand Queen's Service Medal (2012), the Hamilton Citizen Service Award (2014), the Republic of Korea Presidential Commendation (2016), the Hangeul Society's Korean Language Movement Merit Award (2018) and the World Korean Day National Medal (2024).

However, she deflected the credit, stating, "The medals and awards are not mine alone but shared by all Koreans, locals and volunteers."

Regarding future plans, she said, "We will transition support for veterans into sustainable honor through daily life and documentation projects, and make settlement support a year-round permanent service."

She also announced plans to create a model where the elderly, youth and multicultural communities come together on one stage through the upcoming K-Festival on Nov. 8.

"Honoring veterans opens the path to memory, settlement support opens the path to today, and cultural exchange opens the path to tomorrow. The Waikato Korean Association will continue to serve as a K-bridge, connecting Korea and New Zealand." 🇰🇷