

Recipient of Mugunghwa Medal of Order of Civil Merit on 19th World Korean Day

Awarded for her contributions to pioneering Korean American community and establishing global nursing network

The 19th World Korean Day commemorative ceremony awarded the Mugunghwa Medal, the highest civilian honor in Korea, to Yoo Boon-ja, president of the Somang Society in the United States. The Mugunghwa Medal is the highest-grade medal a civilian can receive from the government, and is a recognition of Yoo's contributions to the Korean American community in the U.S. and her global social service.

The World Korean Day commemoration ceremony was held in grandeur on Oct. 2 at the Grand Walkerhill Hotel in Seoul. It was attended by President Lee Jae Myung, key domestic figures and 370 Korean association presidents from 67 countries worldwide. Yoo was unable to attend the ceremony due to personal circumstances; the medal will be delivered later via the Consulate General in Los Angeles.

Yoo is regarded as a pioneer of the Korean American community and the godmother of Korean American nurses. After immigrating to the U.S. in 1968, she worked as a nurse at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Texas for approximately 30 years, dedicating herself to strengthening the rights and professional standing of Korean American nurses. In Korea, she previously served as the director of the Nursing Division at the Korean Red Cross.

From nurse to Korean American community leader

In 1971, she founded the Korean American Nurses Association of Southern California and served as its inaugural president. In 1975, she established the Korean American Nurses Association and served as its first and second president. She supported Korean American nurses struggling with English communication barriers and threats of lawsuits, helping them to obtain Registered Nurse (RN) certification and strengthening their capabilities. As the second president of the RN



Yoo Boon-ja, president of the Somang Society

Class in 1972, she contributed to revitalizing the Korean American nursing community and played a significant role in helping countless Korean nurses establish themselves as professionals.

In 2007, Yoo transferred her ownership of the restaurant franchise Busy Bee, which she had operated for 32 years, and sought a new calling after retirement. Drawing on her nursing experience, she began lecturing under the theme "A Beautiful Life, A Beautiful Ending," emphasizing the importance of preparing for a dignified old age and death. This led to the establishment of the nonprofit Somang Society organization.

The Somang Society has the aim of "well-aging" and "well-dying," and has launched various initiatives starting with a living will campaign, and including organ and body donation, hospice education and a movement to simplify funeral procedures.

Yoo emphasized in an interview with Yonhap News Agency, "Instead of having death 'done to you' without preparation, facing death through calmly organizing one's daily life and surroundings is the path that will benefit oneself, one's family and society."

"Working as a nurse, I saw many patients living for five



to six years in a vegetative state, causing suffering to their families. I have worked toward ‘well-dying’ in order to prevent the waste of social medical resources.”

Somang Society and ‘well-dying’ movement

A living will is a document that records decisions regarding organ and body donation, the scope of medical treatment in emergencies, funeral arrangements, and plans for the use of assets and condolence money. It requires the signatures of two witnesses. Yoo particularly pointed out that first-generation Korean Americans sacrificed everything for their children while neglecting retirement planning, emphasizing the importance of preparation to reduce tragic deaths in old age.

The Somang Society also operates the six-week Bereavement Family Camp to help those who have lost family members overcome loneliness and anger and prepare for their own death. Yoo herself is a bereaved family member who lost her husband 15 years ago. She set an example by donating the approximately US\$30,000 in condolence money received at her husband’s funeral to the Somang Society.

Yoo’s activities have expanded beyond the U.S. to the global stage. In 2009, she launched the “Well of Hope Project” in Chad, Africa, in cooperation with the Korean international relief organization Good Neighbors. Chad is an extremely poor country where many residents suffer from illness due to drinking contaminated water amid severe water shortages. According to the IMF, Chad’s per capita GDP in 2020 was \$741, with 80 percent of the population living on less than \$1.90 a day and life expectancy at just 53 years.

In February 2010, approaching her 18th birthday, Yoo visited the village of Ndou, south of N’Djamena, the capital of Chad, and dug the first well. Witnessing the local residents forced to quench their thirst with muddy water solidified her calling. When clear water gushed from the first well, completed in just three days, the entire village cheered. Yoo remembered this as “the sound of life.”

The Well of Hope campaign subsequently expanded, receiving enthusiastic support from the Korean community. Even during the 2008 financial crisis, Koreans participated by selling wedding rings or splitting their salaries to donate. To date, 451 wells have been installed in Chad, providing clean water to approximately 450,000 people. The cost to install one well is about \$3,000, benefiting 1,000 local residents.

Bridge between life and death: Yoo Boon-ja’s calling

The well project also expanded into education. Beginning



Yoo Boon-ja held a publication celebration for her autobiography, “Tomorrow, a Different Sun Rises,” in 2006 at the Radisson Wilshire Plaza Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, attended by over 200 family members, friends and dignitaries.



Yoo receives the Ellis Island Award presented by the Ellis Island Honors Society (EIHS) in May 2025.

with the establishment of the first Hope School in 2013, five schools have now been built in Chad. At the opening ceremony for the first school, Yoo shed tears as she urged the students, “Study hard and become great people.” Funds raised through the Hope Society total \$1,684,200.

In May 2025, Yoo received the Ellis Island award from the Ellis Island Honors Society (EIHS), given to those who have contributed to the development of American society. EIHS highly commended Yoo for her contributions to medical education through research on dementia and family caregiving, as well as organ donation campaigns.

Her publications include “Tomorrow, a Different Sun Rises” and “That’s Why Life is Beautiful,” which embody her philosophy and spirit of service.

Yoo has brought hope to the Korean community and around the world as a nurse, a volunteer and a leader. She lives by the principle that “Sharing saves lives,” drawing from the wellspring of love deep within her heart. The wells and schools in Chad, the growth of Korean nurses and the well-dying movement are the legacies of her dedication.

Yoo’s life transcends mere personal achievement; it is a bridge connecting the Korean diaspora with a love of humanity. Her story continues to plant seeds of hope in someone’s heart today. 🌱