

January 11, 2016

Dear Mr. President:

My name is Edward T. Chang and I am the Director of the Young Oak Kim Center for Korean American Studies at the University of California Riverside. I'm writing to you in order to draw your attention to the extraordinary life of Col. Young Oak Kim who served in the U.S. Army during World War II and the Korean War. Col. Kim was not only a war hero, he was a humanitarian whose community service activities changed the lives of countless Americans. He was a peacemaker who connected the Japanese and Korean American communities. His commitment to creating a better world through humanitarian work was exemplary. I am requesting that Col. Kim's military and humanitarian records be reviewed and his actions rewarded with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Col. Kim was born in Los Angeles on January 29, 1919. The son of Korean immigrants, Col. Kim grew up during a period of racial discrimination and hardship. Despite these obstacles, he surmounted the difficulties and went on to become one of the most celebrated heroes of the 100th Infantry Battalion Nisei (Japanese) unit during World War II. The commanding officer at the time wanted to transfer Col. Kim out of the 100th Battalion citing that Japanese and Korean history and cultural differences would be a problem. However, he argued with his commanding officer to let him stay.

"There is no Japanese nor Korean here," Kim said to his commanding officer. "We're all Americans and we're fighting for the same cause."

Col. Kim saw no color lines. He helped lead the 100th Battalion with excellence, saving countless lives and winning multiple battles. During WWII he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his brave actions in Italy during the Battle of Anzio and the liberation of Rome. He earned a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, two Legion of Merit honors, and two Purple Hearts. France later awarded him with the Legion d'Honneur and a Croix de Guerre. Italy awarded him a Military of Valor Cross and a Bronze Cross of Military Valor.

During WW II, Col. Kim witnessed the destruction of cultures, identities, and communities. He realized helping and caring for each other are the first steps to lasting peace. So he made a promise to himself:

"If I survive this war, I will devote my life to the betterment of the community I belong to."

When WWII ended, Col. Kim was sent back to the United States. In 1946 he was honorably discharged and returned to civilian life. But in 1950 the Korean War broke out. Col. Kim couldn't sit idly by so he reenlisted and went to the frontlines. While he was in Korea he became

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the first minority to command an Army battalion. Col. Kim was assigned to the 31st Infantry of the 7th Infantry Division by Col. William J. McCaffrey. Col. Kim became the battalion's Chief Intelligence Officer and its de facto operations officer. Under Col. Kim's leadership, the 31st Infantry won almost every battle it participated in. The 31st Infantry also played a major role in creating the 38th parallel – the present day border – between North and South Korea. Col. Kim served with distinction during the Korean War and earned a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and his third Purple Heart. Col. Kim was later awarded a Taeguk Order of Military Merit, Korea's highest military honor for his actions during the war. Col. Kim's military prowess was recognized by MSN.com and he was listed as one of the top 16 American war heroes.

But his military career is not the only thing that should be recognized or considered. While serving in Korea he and his unit supported an orphanage. Col. Kim convinced his soldiers to provide not only food and money for the 500 war orphans but also to give their time reading, singing, and participating in activities with the children. He believed that the cultural understanding and community service his soldiers experienced would make them and the children better people and better peacemakers. Many of the orphans went on to become teachers, leaders, and artists. Col. Kim's compassion and humanitarian work touched the lives of everyone around him and continue to echo throughout the world today. For his humanitarian work, Korea awarded Col. Kim with a civilian decoration, a Moran Medal.

After the Korean War ended, Col. Kim became an Instructor at the US Army Infantry School at Fort Benning in Georgia. He continued to serve in the military for years. Col. Kim finally retired from the Army in 1972. After his retirement he kept the promise he made to himself during WWII: he dedicated the rest of his life to helping others. For the next 33 years, Col. Kim worked as a humanitarian, peacemaker, and community leader. His work included the following activities:

- Member of the Board of Trustees, LA Chapter of the United Way
- Chairman of the Center for Asian Pacific Families
- Vice Chairman of the Japanese Museum National Museum
- Founding Co-Chairman and Honorary Chairman of the Korean Health, Education, Information and Research Center (KHEIR)
- Founding member of the Board of Trustees and Chairman of the Korean American Coalition
- Chairman of the 100th/442nd/MIS Memorial Foundation
- Chairman Emeritus, Go For Broke Education Foundation
- Developed and helped secure funding for the Koreatown Youth and Community Center

KHEIR became one of the largest ethnic charity health organizations in America. Col. Kim's humanitarian work also included helping women and children through the Center for Asian

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Pacific Families which became the largest shelter in Southern California for victims of domestic violence. Col. Kim also served as a mentor and as a bridge between Korea-Japan relations; he promoted cooperation and ethnic peace and helped establish the Go For Broke Education Foundation. In Los Angeles, the Go For Broke Memorial for the 100th Battalion Nisei unit sits proudly in the city's Little Tokyo district. The monument includes a plaque dedicated to Col. Kim and other leaders for the successful construction of the memorial.

Today, there is a school in Los Angeles named after Col. Kim: the Young Oak Kim Academy. In Korea, children learn about this American-born Korean who served the United States with valor and honor and whose humanitarian work serves as an example for others to follow.

I personally knew Col. Kim during his last years. His passion for helping others touched my life and changed my world view. By trade, I am a Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California Riverside where I've been teaching since 1992. Today, I'm also the director of the YOK Center for Korean American Studies at UC Riverside. The story of how this research center was established began with my first meeting with Col. Kim. I first heard about him while doing research. His story was fascinating and amazing. However, I was baffled at the fact that Col. Kim's life and work was hardly recognized by his community or the community at large. So I investigated.

When I met Col. Kim in the early 1980s he was lively, active, and charismatic. But what struck me most about him was his humility. This war hero – who had earned the highest military honors from France, Korea and Italy – kept his medals inside a dusty shoe box in his garage! I asked him why he did this and his answer blew me away. He said that military, civilian, or any kind of awards were just simple material things and that the true honor of a person's life came from the beauty and satisfaction achieved through helping one another grow and thrive. From that moment on I wanted to be more like Col. Kim.

So I decided to establish a research center in his name and continue his legacy of humanitarian and community service work. Today, the YOK Center is involved in a myriad of academic and community activities including: providing volunteer instructors for Korean American culture classes for K-12 students at local schools; offering an intern program for college students; host an annual quiz bowl at the YOK Academy in Los Angeles and provide prizes and books to the school; speaking at local K-12 schools in Riverside, Indio, and Los Angeles about higher education and the life of Col. Kim; lecturing around the world in countries like – Cambodia, Korea, Japan, China, and Vietnam – about Col. Kim and his message of peace and humanitarianism.

Although Col. Kim passed away from cancer in 2005, he remains a role model for all ages, ethnicities, and future generations. I look up to Col. Kim and believe that his extraordinary life

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and his military and humanitarian contributions to the United States define what it means to be a hero.

For all the reasons listed above and more, I humbly ask that you consider awarding Col. Kim the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Sincerely,



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