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Group hopes to reunite families

By [Gordon Y.K. Pang](#)
Advertiser Staff Writer

Lim Jung Ja's eyes tear up when she begins to talk about North Korea and the cousin she left behind.

"Why cannot go there?" she asks, struggling to express her frustration using the little English she knows.

The 92-year-old widow, who has lived in Hawai'i for 35 years, has no relatives that she knows of outside North Korea, a place cut off to her since she left there half a lifetime ago.

Lim said she yearns to find her 82-year-old cousin and ask him whether her parents survived the Korean War and, if they did, how they lived after the 1953 cease-fire.

Now, an effort has been launched to thaw the 56-year communications freeze between the United States and North Korea and eventually allow individuals such as Lim to reunite with their families. The freeze has left all but the most wealthy and well-connected Korean-Americans without the ability to correspond through mail or telephone, much less in person.

Alice Jean Suh, coordinator with the SaemSORI Project, said project officials are meeting with individuals across the United States to collect information about relatives in North Korea who have been cut off since that country shut its borders at the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Officials will be in Honolulu this month.

"We're just collecting the information and putting all the cases together," Suh said. "These family reunions are not something we can do. It has to be a government-to-government effort."

The project's organizer, the Eugene Bell Foundation — a nonprofit organization with a long history of charity work in North Korea — plans to present SaemSORI information to U.S. government officials in hopes that they will approach North Korean leaders about allowing the emigres and their descendants to try to reach those they left behind, Suh said.

There are an estimated 2 million Koreans in the United States, Suh said, although it isn't clear how many have relatives in North Korea. In Hawai'i, of 1.2 million people reported in the 2000 U.S. Census, 23,537 checked themselves off as "Korean only." That number rises to 41,352 when including people who checked themselves as Korean in combination with another race. Both tallies ranked sixth among the races in Hawai'i.

Bae Sung Keun, chairman of the Hawai'i Council of Korean Americans from North America, said his organization includes about 300 registered members.

But Bae believes there are many more local Koreans with ties to North Korea, especially among the elderly. "The old, they don't like to come out and register their names," he said.



Lim Jung Ja places her hands on an old photo of a long-lost cousin, Oh Ja Young. Now 92, Lim fled North Korea and eventually settled in Hawai'i, where she has lived for 35 years. She knows of no relatives outside of North Korea and yearns only to find her cousin.

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FINDING LOST RELATIVES

Members of the Eugene Bell Foundation want to help those who believe they have relatives in North Korea and want to get in touch with them after more than a half-century of no contact.

Foundation leaders will discuss the SaemSORI Project from 7 to 9 p.m. Monday at the Korean United Methodist Church, 1639 Ke'eaumoku St.

For additional information, contact Bae Sung Keun, chairman of the Hawaii

'THE LAST CHANCE'

Bae left North Korea for the United States when he was 2 years old. Now 60, he came to Hawai'i in 1976. The businessman said when his father passed away five years ago, he still longed to know what happened to five siblings. Bae was given a registry of their names and last known addresses in the Hwanghae Province.

While political ties between the United States and North Korea may remain chilly, Suh said, governments should put aside differences for the sake of reunifying families.

Local Korean-American Janice Koh, who is working with the Bell Foundation, said the organization and its leader, Dr. Stephen Linton, have the influence to pull off the Saemsoni Project mission. Koh defines the term "saemsoni" as the sound of a river or creek. The Linton family has been providing aid to community health facilities in North Korea for five generations.

Koh, who believes she has an aunt still alive in North Korea, and Bae's group are helping to organize this month's event, which will bring Linton and Suh to Honolulu for an information session at the Korean United Methodist Church.

Duk Hee Murabayashi, a leader in the Korean-American community here, said it is critical for the effort to happen soon since many of those who left just before the war are dying off.

"It's the last chance," Murabayashi said.

PRAYING FOR HOME

Since neither reunification of the divided Korea or normalized diplomatic relations between the United States and North Korea are likely to happen soon, she said, a project like Saemsoni is imperative.

Suh agreed. "Many of these people are in their 80s and 90s, many of them have already died," she said. "I don't know if we have much more time. We can't wait."

Murabayashi estimates that one-third of the Koreans living in Hawai'i have some tie to North Korea.

"The theory is that those who fled North Korea are more apt to immigrate to North America since once their roots were broken, it was easier for them to move," she said.

Lim Jung Ja, who grew up in the same Pyongyang household as her cousin Oh Ja Young, said she has remembered his last known address through the past 55 years.

She has not tried to mail a letter because she has been told that North Koreans with relatives on the outside have been persecuted.

"Me, never mind," Lim said. "My cousin, hard time."

A devout member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Lim said "every morning, every night, I pray." Lim said she prays for the souls of people living in North Korea, where there are restrictions on religious practices.

And she prays, she said, for the opportunity to return to her homeland.

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Council of Korean
Americans from North
Korea, at 387-8880.



Lim Jung Ja, 92, tears up as she recalls the family she left behind. She still recalls her cousin's last known address 55 years ago.

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