

Blum Initiative Service Learning Fellowship – The Future Foundation of Korea
(Summer 2016)

Report by: Heajin (Sarah) Kim, M.P.P. Candidate – School of Public Policy



Image: MiraeNanum put on a summer camp for student refugees that included trips to historical sites, including the Peace Museum (pictured) in Jeju, which underscored a shared Korean history. Photo Credit – Heajin (Sarah) Kim, 2016

From June 20th, 2016 to August 26th, 2016, I served as an intern at *MiraeNanum*, the Future Foundation of Korea. There are approximately 28,000 North Korean refugees residing in South Korea (Ministry of Unification, 2013). This number is growing every day and *MiraeNanum* exists to provide various forms of support to North Korean refugees who are currently pursuing a degree in higher education. Although the main goal of the foundation is to provide scholarships for these students, a wide range of services and activities such as counseling, summer camps, and community events are also provided through this agency.

My initial interest in serving at a non-profit for North Korean refugees was rooted in a desire to walk alongside North Korean refugees, hear their stories, and gain a better understanding of what their lives were like as they adjusted to life in South Korea. Throughout my time at the foundation, I was able to do that by participating in community events, meeting experts in the field of North Korea studies, and engaging with non-profit leaders who have been working with North Korean refugees for over ten years. Through this experience, I heard first-hand accounts of terrible things that no one should ever have to endure. I learned that there is an educational and social disparity that occurs upon their arrival such as the time spent in hiding, the differing education systems between the North and South, and the adaptation into a free market society. Upon their arrival into South Korea, many face discrimination and struggle with questions regarding their identity. Moreover, many enter South Korea with a wide range of physical and mental health issues.

As I read and analyzed various publications from the North and the South and gained understanding in the historical and political context of the current events that effect North Korean refugee policy, I

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learned the details of the aid provided by the South Korean government. The 7 part welfare system covers everything from social adaptation training to full tuition coverage for higher education. A combination of the welfare system and the work of non-profit organizations like *MiraeNanum* provide a form of financial security for many of the defectors. However, the system is meant to be a temporary one because the ultimate goal is unification of the two Koreas. In other words, the current system is not sustainable. In the early nineties, many of the benefits were reduced due to the sudden influx of defectors who had been a part of the North Korean lower class. Although most of the benefits were restored by the end of the decade, the loss of welfare became a frightening possibility for many. Currently, many South Koreans are expressing disillusionment and frustration at the imbalanced and unsustainable system.

One of the most important lessons I learned during my time at the foundation was the *bae lyuh* (consideration of others) and the *shi bye* (honor) that my co-workers had for the North Korean defectors. There was no sense of arrogance or having the ‘upper hand’ just because the foundation provided aid to the students. Instead, it was an honorable relationship where real trust was able to develop. The students found security and a social network through the foundation and it contributed to their overall success in academia and beyond. I am grateful for the opportunity to learn and grow with the people that I met here at *MiraeNanum* and hope to further research and explore methods and policies that will contribute to creating effective, sustainable, and equitable refugee policy.



Image: The MiraeNanum offices are located in Myeongdong - a popular Chinese tourist destination with many stores. Many refugees who spent time hiding in China are hired by these stores because they are able to speak to the tourists. Photo Credit – Heajin (Sarah) Kim, 2016