

I pursued a service fellowship after graduating from college, jetting off to the “Land of Smiles,” as Thailand is affectionately called. Having grown up in two places as disparate as Texas and Korea, I had long been interested in working at the intersection of many cultures. My split experiences fostered my curiosity for worlds outside my own and encouraged my move to Bangkok, which I called home for nearly three years.

During this time, I worked as a public policy and government relations consultant, advising clients on how to navigate the Thai market and craft effective advocacy strategies. We helped them understand the complexities behind government policymaking—the stakeholders involved, their relations with one another, and the political and cultural influences at play. We counseled our clients ahead of public hearings and closed-door government engagements, where they furnished best practices and feedback on draft laws and regulations. Many of our clients were industry leaders providing innovative products and services that rapidly transformed everyday life, including data analytics, cloud computing, e-commerce, and ride-hailing.

I also closely observed and reported on Thai politics. I was troubled by how easily authorities exploited the law to protect their interests and cement their grip on power. Critics are silenced, the powerful evade justice, electoral rules are designed to guarantee desired outcomes, and youth-led calls for democracy are suppressed using any number of obscure laws and either draconian or flexible interpretations of them. The political developments that I dissected and analyzed prompted my wrestling with the human rights implications of laws and their applications.

My professional experiences as a consultant were key to shaping my desire to pursue a legal education. However, what served as the clearest confirmation of my conviction to use the law to make a difference was my relationship with Grandma.

I met Grandma and her family at church, and the spontaneous meal we shared after service marked the beginning of our special friendship. We ate at an unassuming food court on the top floor of a nearby mall every Sunday thereafter, and they became like family to me.

Grandma and her granddaughter were political asylees from Cambodia. They were undergoing a lengthy and uncertain appeals process for their negative refugee status determination from the UNHCR. Grandma's daughter and grandson were domestic violence victims who had fled their home in Korea and had overstayed their visas in Thailand. While Bangkok brought the family of four together, arrest and deportation were ever-present threats. They struggled to make ends meet by selling plastic bottles and beer cans collected off the streets. The city that I loved and made home for three years was no haven for Grandma, who narrowly evaded agents working for the Cambodian government on several accounts.

I supported the family in what way I could, from our weekly lunches to their monthly rent. I became an "auntie" to the kids, organizing regular outings and hosting their first sleepover. We celebrated birthdays and Christmas together. We took trips to Thailand's beautiful coastline, where I attempted to teach them how to swim and marveled at their exceptional appetite by which they conquered platefuls of tiger prawns, deep-fried sea bass, and grilled squid.

However, I knew that I could not meet Grandma and her family's need for legal counsel and representation. We recognized that her daughter and grandson would eventually need to return to Korea, where they could receive an education, obtain employment, and access healthcare and other welfare as Korean citizens.

It was of utmost importance that they be rooted in a community that protected them, connected them to legal aid, and facilitated their reintegration into a society that has not always been friendly to multicultural families and single mothers. Our search led us to an organization that supports overseas Koreans with their return home and resettlement. Just before borders were sealed as the coronavirus swept across Asia, I booked their flights and helped shoulder their fine for overstaying. I coordinated their travel plans with the NGO representatives, who then worked with the Korean embassy and the Thai authorities to voluntarily report their departure and mitigate unforeseen complications.

In February 2020, we held back our tears as we embraced and bid farewell to Grandma's daughter and grandson at Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport. They remain under the care of a government-sponsored

center serving marriage migrant survivors of domestic violence, through which they receive medical and legal services, housing, language and skills training, and schooling.

To this day, Grandma and her granddaughter are still in Bangkok, with their appeals process ongoing and any immediate hopes for relocation suspended. Refugees, displaced persons, and other undocumented individuals like Grandma have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. They are among the first to lose their jobs, to see their educational rights denied amid a widening digital divide, and to face far greater risk of exposure to the virus but without commensurate access to medical care. The right to claim asylum and find refuge has altogether been eroded under these present times.

My friendship with Grandma kindled my desire to study law. I was invited into her family, whose background and experiences differed vastly from my own. I have rarely felt more challenged as I did when through our relationship, I learned what it meant to truly invest in someone's life. I long for the day when Grandma's grandchildren can be reunited and can freely chase after their dreams, not barred by circumstances outside their control.

I am excited to embark on a new journey at law school this fall, where I can be equipped with the tools to continue advocating for Grandma and to serve as an effective counsel to many more families. I look forward to cultivating my interests in international human rights and immigration law and to applying my studies to the benefit of those around me. My legal training will enable me to provide both targeted support to the most vulnerable members of our society and to champion large-scale change for entire communities.