

# Organizing Korean Americans Against Homophobia

By Judy Han

"Homosexual laws are laws of death and destruction: 80 percent of homosexuals eventually die from AIDS, syphilis, infection in the intestines, Hepatitis B, and other sexually transmitted diseases. Biblical, historical, and medical evidences prove that homosexuality results in condemnation, death, and judgment." —Peter Kim, Coordinator of the Sexual Responsibility Act Committee

When I came out to my parents as a lesbian nearly ten years ago, they went through a lot of what other parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) children experience: they blamed themselves, they blamed me, and they grieved the loss of the daughter they thought they had. And like other working-class immigrant parents whose sense of community relies heavily on family and church, my parents felt alone, and they found no resource available in Korean.

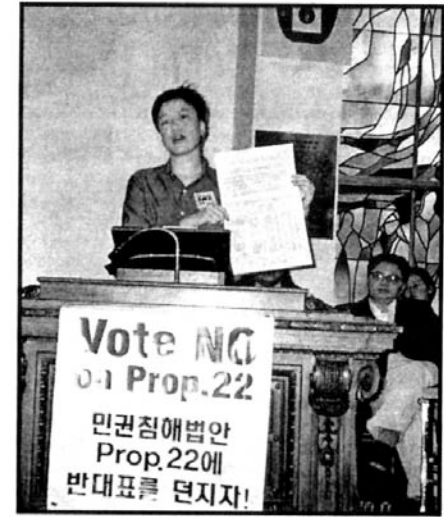
There was only one person they trusted enough to turn to, and it was Reverend Lee Chang-sun at The First Wilshire United Methodist Church in Los Angeles. My father had been attending Rev. Lee's church since he first arrived alone in the United States in 1980, and when the rest of our family immigrated in 1984, Wilshire UMC became our home church,

too. My parents took an active leadership role, both becoming deacons over the years. My brother and sister taught Sunday School, and my sister married at this church. Rev. Lee comforted my parents: "It's okay—we're all sinners and need forgiveness."

In December 1999, Rev. Lee was among 267 prominent Korean American religious and civic leaders in Southern California who organized a large-scale petition drive to place the California Defense of Sexual Responsibility Act (CDSRA) on the November 2000 ballot—an effort described by its author as "an opportunity to launch a torpedo toward the radical homosexual destroyer."

## CDSRA Background

I first found out about CDSRA in Korean language newspapers that announced the first public meetings in December 1999. It was widely reported that hundreds of Korean American religious leaders as well as civic leaders like Charles Kim of the Korean American Coalition (a national civil rights organization) were in attendance—joined by Christian Coalition representatives, California Senator Pete Knight (author of anti-gay Proposition 22, a.k.a. "the Knight Initiative"), and Richard Mountjoy (author of the anti-immigrant Prop 187). A roster of 267 Korean American names was soon published in a full-



*Judy Han unveils the media campaign at KACR Press Conference in Los Angeles on January 17, 2000.*

page ad that included a copy of the CDSRA petition, and in the weeks following, more than a dozen articles appeared in the Korean language media about "homosexual special rights" and church petition drives. A few of my friends who work in Koreatown were handed the petition at their workplace, and I've heard that teachers and parents were also actively collecting signatures.

Authored by a retired Orange County engineer named Lee Olson, CDSRA sought to "prohibit public entities from endorsing, educating, recognizing or promoting homosexuality as acceptable, moral behavior." CDSRA's website further explained the goals of the initiative as an effort to "prohibit public entities from including the phrase 'sexual orientation' in any law, regulation, rule, ordinance, code, policy, resolution, declaration, or proclamation" because it argued that "sexual

orientation is the rubric used to instill the false concept that homo-sexuality [sic] is an immutable human characteristic," and because "sexual orientation is also a euphemism used to mask the offensiveness of homosexuality and other unnatural forms of sexual relations."

CDSRA proponents specifically pointed to a set of anti-discrimination bills enacted into California law in January 2000—including those protecting students in public schools from anti-gay bias, ensuring fair housing and employment for LGBT Californians, and providing health insurance for domestic partners of state employees. Claiming that these were "special rights," CDSRA proponents argued that LGBT activists were mandating acceptance to a degree that denied Christians their religious freedom and moral prerogative. CDSRA organizers, particularly Reverend Peter Kim who acted as the Korean American coordinator, used familiar statistics to dismiss LGBT rights. For instance, a 1996 poll commissioned by the rightwing Family Research Council found that more than four out of five Americans (83 percent) answered that homosexuals "should not be given special protections." A 1998 poll conducted by The Claremont Institute, a conservative think tank based in California, found that 53 percent of Californians believed that "homosexual conduct, such as sodomy between two men, was never morally right." These questionable research "findings" and other medical-biblical condemnations of homosexuality appeared repeatedly in mainstream and Christian Korean language media.

CDSRA needed to collect 419,260 signatures of registered voters—an unlikely goal for a campaign with no organized staff, no fundraising, and no major endorsement outside the Korean American community—which only has about 50,000 registered voters in Southern

California. As expected, CDSRA failed to qualify as a ballot initiative, but as feared, the momentum built around CDSRA helped the right wing to mobilize support for Proposition 22, the initiative banning same-sex marriage that was recently approved by California voters. [See "California Nightmare" by Kate Raphael, *Sojourner*, Vol. 25, No. 8, April 2000.] Weeks before the March election, Peter Kim and other conservative Korean American Christians were being courted by Proposition 22 backers who wanted to demonstrate that Asian American communities supported them.

### **The Korean American Christian Right**

According to March 2000 figures released by the Korean General Consulate, there are approximately two million Korean Americans in the United States, of which an estimated 31.7 percent (650,000) reside in Southern California. It is estimated that nearly 80 percent of Korean Americans attend almost a thousand Korean American churches in Los Angeles County, Orange County, and San Diego County. Many of these churches are massive in scale—Young Nak Presbyterian Church boasts 10,000 members, and the Oriental Mission Church claims 4,500 members—and many are involved in multimillion dollar expansion projects.

Korean American churches are predominantly Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Evangelical, with Catholics in the minority. Remarkably, CDSRA brought together ministers and congregations of all Protestant denominations, despite the fact that Korean churches are usually divided strictly along denominational lines, and are rife with institutional and ideological rivalries. More significantly, CDSRA became the first statewide political campaign to extensively

involve Korean American churches, much to the dismay of many who have long sought to activate the Christian community on pressing issues like immigration, welfare reform, and bilingual education.

There are certainly dissenting opinions on gay issues within many Christian institutions, with some working to build churches that accept and embrace LGBT members. The National Religious Leadership Roundtable (NRLR)—an interfaith network of leaders from pro-LGBT faith, spiritual, and religious organizations—is a case in point. Unfortunately, there are no progressive, justice-oriented ministries in support of LGBT rights among the heavily immigrant Korean American and other Asian American churches in Southern California, and networks like NRLR do not actively work in immigrant communities of color. In a climate that irrefutably equates homophobia with Christianity, it's difficult to engage Korean American Christians in even the most elementary discussions about LGBT rights. Even moderate and liberal Korean Americans who otherwise support civil rights were hesitant to condemn CDSRA or voice their support for LGBT rights because they feared that their actions would directly contradict Christian beliefs. Most mainstream Korean American community-based organizations declined to take a stand against CDSRA partly because they did not want to antagonize the Christian churches.

The Christian Coalition has denied that it played a leadership role in mobilizing the Korean American community, but the organization is unabashed about the base-building potential demonstrated by CDSRA. California Christian Coalition Director Miriam Archer told *AsianWeek* in January 2000, "I always knew a great many Koreans were devout believers. This is going to get a lot more

Korean people to register to vote. It'll be a great thing for America." Archer estimated that Korean churches registered 15,000 to 20,000 new voters during CDSRA, and noted that a Korean American chapter of the California Christian Coalition formed on December 3, 1999.

## **LGBT Organizing and Korean Americans**

Many progressive activists have pointed out that the mainstreaming of LGBT politics and the ongoing focus on securing same-sex marriage walk dangerously closely with the right-wing rhetoric of "family values." Because mandating and enforcing marriage is also a national Korean pastime, the Korean media has disproportionately focused on LGBT marriage as well—as though all we want is to get married and have children, just like everyone else. Moreover, in personal conversations with immigrant LGBT Korean Americans, I've found that most have little interest in LGBT politics or activism—many of them really just want the right to marry and prove that LGBT relationships could be stable and respectable.

Many immigrant LGBT Korean Americans in Southern California attend conservative churches, and even when their own ministers publicly condemned homosexuality in the context of CDSRA, they themselves could not raise criticism. Most remain in the closet—their identities and relationships hidden from family, workplace, and church. It's clear that the "me too" politics of mainstream LGBT organizing—securing a "piece of the pie" without broader commitment to social change—is ineffective when people who are most directly affected by the injustices are also the least likely to speak up. When I was trying to mobilize community support for a press

conference to denounce CDSRA in January, for instance, my invitations were mostly met with surprise and fear by closeted queer Korean Americans. Most of them were surprised that anyone would publicly support LGBT rights, and most of them couldn't even add their names to a counter-ad campaign. Assurances that they wouldn't be outed, and that they would be joined by hundreds of straight people did not comfort them—many of them simply had too much at stake.

Generally speaking, there is a serious gap between immigrant LGBT Korean Americans and the mostly U.S.-raised Korean Americans including the so-called "1.5 generation" like myself. Those of us who grew up and came out in the United States generally have had some access to mainstream LGBT cultures and politics, whether it's watching Ellen come out on TV or joining in pride marches. And if we're lucky, we know about queer communities of color—beyond the mainstream Castro and West Hollywood scenes—and the intersections of progressive and queer politics. On the other hand, while national LGBT efforts are trying to hold Dr. Laura accountable, immigrant LGBT Korean Americans have to listen to their own minister deliver sermons about the evils of homosexuality, and watch in silence while their own family members sign anti-gay petitions. It hurts immeasurably more when it's right in your "home." The problem isn't that Korean culture is somehow "more homophobic"—there is an active LGBT social and political movement gaining momentum in South Korea—but rather that there is a serious disconnect between the immigrant and mainstream communities. While hundreds of thousands of Korean Americans were signing CDSRA petitions, for instance, mainstream LGBT organizations—with a few exceptions—seemed to view CDSRA petition drives as

primarily a Korean American issue, and only secondarily an LGBT issue.

In a community meeting to oppose CDSRA held in January, a straight activist who had recently arrived from Korea said that he was angry at Korean American churches for supporting CDSRA, but what infuriated him even more was the silence on the part of LGBT communities. Of course, he was completely insensitive about the reality of violence and fear that produce that silence, but his anger also illustrated that a new LGBT organizing model had to emerge. It is still imperative to have LGBT leadership at the core, but there has to be a visible critical mass—including significant participation by straight community members—in order to organize publicly and demand justice. Past experiences have shown the limitations of relying on the few out LGBT figureheads. And in our case, building a broad-based, gay-straight alliance with organizations that might not ordinarily prioritize LGBT issues was very much a necessity.

## **Korean Americans For Civil Rights**

Korean Americans for Civil Rights (KACR) formed in response to CDSRA, and committed ourselves to educating the Korean American community about anti-LGBT initiatives, raising community awareness about LGBT issues, and fostering a long-term alliance in the Korean American community to work on progressive social issues. Those of us who work in progressive social justice movements believe that the Christian right was attempting to galvanize a base in California by using anti-gay bigotry. In particular, the right was working to regain the ground it had lost in the Korean community and other communities of color due to its attacks on immigrants, people of color, women, and poor people

through initiatives like the anti-immigrant Prop. 187, anti-affirmative action Prop. 209, and anti-bilingual education Prop. 227. We knew that fostering homophobia and bigotry in the Korean American community would help the right to pass Prop. 22, and we wanted to stop them from further expanding their divisive strategy in our communities. We also wanted to hold our own community accountable for their bigotry.

The organizing committee consisted of Korean Americans and other Asian Americans, and it was a gay-straight alliance from the start. Some worked primarily with the immigrant Korean American communities, while some worked in other advocacy organizations. While Korean Americans took the lead in working with Korean language media, other Asian Americans played a significant role in strategizing and coordinating other aspects of the campaign. In less than a month, KACR held joint press conferences in Los Angeles and San Francisco, published two full-page counter-ads, and collected over 300 individual signatures and almost 30 organizational endorsements for the media campaign. We mobilized community actions in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and prompted plans for building a progressive network in places like New York City where the sizable Korean American Christian community certainly has the potential to organize around a rightwing agenda in the future.

The success of Korean Americans for Civil Rights depended on building a coalition of many groups who had not worked together before—Asian Pacific American Legal Center, Gay Asian Pacific Support Network, Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, Korean Resource Center, Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, and the National

Center for Lesbian Rights. It was clear that queer Asian American organizing needed to move beyond simply building internal support networks, and we demanded that straight people actively participate in fighting homophobia.

I think the significance of KACR was manifold. First of all, KACR was a direct and grassroots response to the first explicitly anti-gay organizing efforts in the history of the Korean American community in California, and possibly in the United States. Second, we convened a diverse gay-straight alliance of activists and organizations who worked together to challenge homophobia. Third, by positioning LGBT rights not as a special interest or a plea for tolerance of an otherwise unpalatable "lifestyle," but as a righteous campaign for civil rights that concerned all community members, KACR reframed the debate and linked LGBT issues with other U.S. and Korean social justice issues. Lastly, KACR demonstrated a clear need for monitoring Korean and other "ethnic" language media, and a need to redefine the landscape of LGBT politics to include communities of color in substantial and meaningful ways. There is a tremendous opportunity for organizing around LGBT issues in both English-speaking and immigrant communities of color, and in order to be effective, mainstream LGBT movements must do more than provide occasional translations of informational pamphlets.

During the entire KACR campaign, I didn't ask my parents what they thought about CDSRA—I didn't want to know. I feared that they might have signed the petition themselves, either because they believed it was the Christian thing to do or because they felt obligated. I was regularly appearing in Korean language newspapers and even briefly debated a bigoted minister on television, so I felt

tremendously responsible for what impact my visibility might have on my family's business and social relationships. I found out in early January that my parents did not participate in the petition drive. In fact, they were quite upset about it. My sister told me that my father had refused to sign the petition, asking how he could spit on his own daughter's face. When she expressed concern about her in-law's finding out about me, my sister was scolded for not being more supportive because, as my parents put it, I was doing important work. My parents felt deeply betrayed by their church and their minister—a couple of months later, they left their church of almost twenty years for another church. It was more than I could have asked for—it was a gesture of tremendous support and recognition. It was a sure sign of change and progress.

Judy Han is a lesbian activist who worked as the campaign coordinator for Korean Americans for Civil Rights (KACR).