

GROUP STUDY EXCHANGE experience helps change lives...



KYLE McCREE, sponsored by the Rotary Club of Flint, MI travelled to South Korea as a member of the 2012-13 District 6330 Group Study Exchange team.

Annyeonghaseyo (Hello) from a New World Outlook

My GSE Experience to South Korea Rotary District 3620 allowed me to leave North America for the first time and broaden my personal and professional outlook on the world in which we live. This was a life changing experience that opened my eyes to a new culture, language and way of doing business.

Buildings in my community are rarely older than 100 years old; cities are 150-300 years old and my county is less than 250 years old. Korea gave me a different perspective of time and the lasting impact that one can have on your community. We saw fortresses that have defended cities for centuries and relief carvings of Buddha that stretch back more than a millennium. During GSE, we even saw a tree that was over 600 years old. Given where the tree was in the city, it was probably planted by a person and not by nature. A dozen generations have watered, protected and laid under the same long limbs of this amazing tree. This made me think of what impact I can have on my community that will last beyond my time on Earth. It also helped me to reflect on the wonderful parts of my life & community that are the result of hard work, dedication and sacrifices of community leaders and family members who I never met.

Korea also allowed me to fully appreciate how different our lives in North America are from most of the citizens of the world. While we were in South Korea there was a very tense political standoff between North and South Korea. What amazed me was how relaxed and unconcerned the Korean people were with this situation. Most of the world routinely lives with fear of famine, disease, war or some other calamity that is largely foreign to most people in North America. This is something that I no longer take for granted.

Finally it allowed me to broaden my personal tastes. Prior to GSE, vegetables, particularly those not from a can, were not a large part of my diet. Perhaps it was peer pressure to not stick out (more than I already did) or that we wanted to impress our hosts, but I ate every dish with two exceptions on the entire experience. On the flight home I even ate the Korean meal on the plane instead of the western option.

For all of the personal, cultural and historical experiences I gained during GSE, the biggest impact has been on my career with the Flint & Genesee Chamber of Commerce. Because of my experience in South Korea, I naturally became our point person on all things Korea. This led to being more involved in our efforts to attract companies to locate facilities in Flint & Genesee County. As I talked with site consultants, business executives and even other economic development professionals, I find that my conversations have real substance because I can talk about experiences in business outside of the Midwestern US.

I have found myself talking about the economic development strategy of a city the same size as my community to leverage new ideas to rebuild our economy. Ironically, one of my team members Natalie Pruett and I serve together on the Economic Development & Education Subcommittee for the City of Flint Master Plan. We both found ourselves in Korea looking for innovative solutions that we could apply at home.

In terms of business, South Korea is a very vertically integrated economy with major conglomerates owning businesses across dozens of related industries. They focus on developing core competencies in areas of production, manufacturing or R&D and they leverage them across every business that they own. Their economy also places a heavy emphasis on being self-reliant on Korean-owned companies at the expense of importing goods and services. During GSE, I learned the cultural and historical reasons that have led the Korean people to strive for a self-sufficient economy. We can learn from how they maximize their limited arable farmland. We saw countless rice patties along the freeways because the country wants to grow its own food given the geopolitical climate of their region.

All of these lessons combined to change the way I look at problems and challenges in my community. I am very thankful to the Rotary Foundation and all of the Rotarians in my District for making this experience possible for me.