

In March of 2001, Southern New Jersey Families with Children from China held a conference on Transracial Adoption and the multi-cultural family. Elizabeth Shreve was one of the members of the panel of adult Korean adoptees. Following is her speech, which touched the hearts of those attending the event. This article is reprinted with permission from Elizabeth Shreve and SNJFCC.

My Story . . .

Good afternoon! My name is Elizabeth Shreve and this afternoon I would like to speak about that part of adoption that maybe you don't hear about quite too often. I'd like to talk about discrimination and racial prejudice. But first let me tell you a few things about myself.

I am 22 years old and I live in Union, New Jersey. I was adopted from Seoul, Korea on Halloween night at 3 months of age by Robert and Nancy Shreve. I have an older sister who is 26 and lives in Boston and a younger brother who is 17 and a senior at Roselle Catholic. I grew up with cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, family friends, a great community, a great parish, and wonderful friends. Last May I graduated from Kean University with a degree in Speech Pathology and immediately after graduation I went back for certification in ESL (English as a Second Language). I have been working in a preschool handicapped classroom for the past four years and also tutor at Huntington Learning Center.

As silly as it may sound, all that I do I owe to being adopted. It serves as an inspirational voice within me. And it makes me want to do great things and to be everything that I can since I was given the chance to do so. At a very young age, I realized that someone who loved me very much wanted to give me things that she was not able to give. And so I don't want anything to slip through my fingers. I am grateful for the life I have. I don't want this wonderful gift of life -- this chance that I have been blessed with -- to be taken for granted. So as you can tell, I think adoption is the MOST precious gift there is to give and to receive.

And so with that I'd like to begin talking about coming to terms with your child's ethnic identity and dealing with the discrimination that they may experience. I have just begun to deal with that aspect of multicultural adoption. Just in the past few years racial discrimination has really become an issue in my life. It was always there on some level. But not until two three years ago has it become an issue. It's something I wasn't prepared for. Like I said earlier I grew up in a great family, great community. People accepted me. But when I stepped out of those safety boundaries, I realized that people accepted me as Bob's and Nancy's adopted Korean child. So when I went somewhere different, somewhere new, people would stare at me, whisper, act rudely towards me sometimes. It didn't take me long to recognize that they didn't see me as Bob's and Nancy's adopted Korean child. And honestly, that was difficult for me to deal with. I never expected special treatment for being adopted, but I never expected to feel so isolated either.

When I was 8 or 9 my parents enrolled me in a summer daycamp for adopted Korean children. It's called Camp Friendship (which my family and I called Korean Camp) and it took place in the Watchung Mountains at St. Joseph's Shrine. You learned how to speak, dance, write, do tai kwon do, create origami, and my favorite how to cook like a child growing up in a Korean culture. That was the most memorable and touching experience of my life. I attended the camp for 6 or 7 years and the last two years that I attended I was a counselor... one of the teen counselors. I formed such good friendships, and bonds, and memories from attending that camp for just one week every summer in July. Even though I don't speak to any one from the camp on a regular basis, I know that they will always remember me and I will always remember them. My mother recently told me a story about the first day she dropped me off. She always knew which child was hers when we were at the mall or at a playground. All she had to do was look for a little girl with jet black hair. The day she dropped me off at camp, she looked back and for the first time she looked down and couldn't pick me out. And as the adoptee you think in terms of *I*. I am going through this, I am dealing with being adopted, this is my experience. But I realized that as I was coming to terms with being adopted and being Korean and living in a Caucasian family... as I was dealing with being adopted, so were my parents. And realizing that comforted me in knowing that I'm not the only one who has to deal with this... this isn't just *my* experience.

As a child I don't remember a time when race became an issue for me. Of course, there was the usual taunting that every child experiences... because of how they look, because of their name, because of their height, they wear glasses, whatever. Taunting that I would have experienced whether or not I was adopted. But it wasn't until high school that I was really faced with discrimination because of my ethnicity. I attended Mount Saint Mary Academy in Watchung on Rt. 22. (When I sat down to write this speech I was hesitant to mention the name of my high school. But I think it's important to know that discrimination can take place on many levels, despite your socioeconomic status, your income, where you live, or what school you choose to send your children.) Mount Saint Mary Academy has a program called "big sister little sister". When you become a junior, you become a big sister to a freshman... you show them around, give them a ride home once in awhile, become a familiar face in the halls. Well, my best friend's big sister didn't seem to like her too much or any of her friends. So one dress down day I was walking past "the big sister", who was now a senior, when I heard her comment on what I was wearing... something to the effect that my shirt looked better on the manikin in the store. I said "excuse me" like the assertive person my mother taught me to be and from there a huge fight developed between me and the senior class all because I talked back to an upperclassmen. The next day my friends and I were surrounded at the lunch table by twenty or more seniors. They were all talking, very loudly, amongst themselves about how one should never talk back to a senior.

And with every other comment one of the ignorant seniors would say, " Oh, she's so cute like a little china doll." After the lunch table instances, they would follow me to class while they talked about how they "...couldn't believe the resemblance between me and my older sister!" (who also attended the school four years earlier and was **not** adopted.) It got to the point where other students would come to my rescue sticking up for me... and even my sister made a few visits to school and made a few phone calls to the girls parents. The whole time, I don't know why I didn't tell my mother or father. I wasn't ashamed or embarrassed. I guess I just didn't want them to get involved. Or maybe I thought they wouldn't understand or take it seriously. But my sister eventually told my mother and my mother made a call to the guidance counselor. So we were all called to the office and the counselor asked for my input when it came to the punishment. She was willing to suspend the girls, not allow them to attend the prom, even not graduate with the rest of the class. I simply said that I just wanted an apology. Of course, I didn't get one. And the stares didn't stop for the rest of the year. But the comments did, and for me that wasn't enough, but it was ok.

So how did that affect my life? I LOVE WHO I AM. I am proud to be who I am. But still, I know that when some people look at me, they see another oriental. And the first time I was called that in a negative tone, it hurt. It hurts to know that in my own neighborhood, there are people who think I'm a foreigner. A few summers ago, I was walking and I passed two elderly people who were chatting at the edge of their walkways. And as I was about to turn the corner I heard, " Those people are moving in faster and faster these days." I'm understanding. I know that elderly people don't represent the American viewpoint accurately, but it still hurts. So from my high school experience, to daily discrimination to once-in-awhile discrimination I can say that from every discriminatory experience I've had, I have been able to take something from it- whether it be inner strength or reassurance in my identity.

So those are some examples and stories of how I felt as a minority, literally. But how do you suppose I felt when I was a part of the majority? Do you think I felt more accepted? I remember in high school, there were these group of girls who were Filipino. And I hung out with them thinking that I was immersing myself in my culture.... But really I just wanted a taste of Asian culture, and I didn't even care if it wasn't Korean. I just wanted to fit in. I wanted to go places and be around people who looked like me. A few years later I dated a guy who was Indonesian. And he happened to live in Northern New Jersey where the Asian culture seems to be the majority rather than the minority. And even there, I felt out of place. We would go places and I would walk through the door and I would receive the same stares as I would get from a room full of white people. Now maybe you're thinking, well it's all in your head. If you feel that way with white people AND Asian people then it must be you. No.... the Asian people I was associating myself with were from Asian homes. They spoke the language, they practiced their traditions, they

dressed and behaved differently from someone who did not grow up in an Asian home and community. I was going through a phase that we call in the ESL profession **overidentifying**. I convinced myself that I had something in common with these people because we looked alike. But that was the only thing we had in common, and that wasn't enough. So when I was rejected it made me not want to be apart of the Asian culture or the white American culture. So I was torn between culture and physical appearance. One group didn't accept me because I looked different. Another group didn't accept me because I acted different. And so I came to the same conclusion and life lesson that I had come to as in my experiences as a minority: I love who I am and where I come from even more.

To be different is good thing. Today, I embrace my differences. I love who I am and where I come from. And I don't just come from Korea or America. I come from an adoptive lifestyle. Those bonds and friendships I made at Korean Camp aren't memorable because I blended in. They're memorable because I was surrounded by people who shared the same experiences, who came from the same place - an adoptive home. Being adopted has always been an important part of my life, but not a big deal. And what I mean is- being adopted affects every aspect of my life: the choices I make, the person I choose to be, my goals, my whole being. But it doesn't define me. I'm more than an adopted child who has done this and done that all while living the white American lifestyle. I am a person, I am a woman, I am a student, I am a teacher, I am Korean, I am American, I am adopted, I am Lee Se Wha, and I am Elizabeth Shreve. I have a supportive family, a wonderful boyfriend of two and a half years who loves my ethnic identity just as much as I do and has helped me through those very difficult and awkward moments that I've spoken about, I have great friends, I have a great career in which I can help others embrace their physical differences as well as linguistic differences, I have the world at my fingertips.

While attending Korean camp I realized something. And I'd like you to think about relaying this message and/or instilling it in your children. I am Korean American. I am of Korean blood, skin, eyes, hair... but I am from an American culture. I do not speak, dress, practice the same traditions, or live a Korean lifestyle. I am Korean American. I am not only Korean, I am not only American, I am Korean American. Forming this identity changed the way I looked at myself. I recommend that all of you encourage your children to attend a similar camp or program. I promise it will be a lifelong experience for you as well as your children. They will take from it their Korean heritage and enhance their American culture which will enrich their lives, their self-confidence, their love for themselves as an adopted child, and love and appreciation of where they come from and where they are headed.

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