

**PATSY  
SURH  
O'CONNELL**



## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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**S**teeped in Confucianism, Koreans venerate their elders. Sixty used to be a big birthday, with a celebration called *hwangap*. The singing, soju toasts and sumptuous banquets now salute those turning 70 because people are living longer, in South Korea at least.\*

In 1950, life expectancy on the Korean peninsula was anyone's guess. People were dying by the thousands—teenage soldiers on both sides and hapless refugees caught in the crossfire, including orphaned children, nursing mothers and wispy-bearded elders in their traditional long white coats and stovepipe hats.

Patsy Surh O'Connell remembers it all. When you study her radiant face it's hard to believe she is 74, though there's no mistaking her wisdom. Her Korean name is Surh In Suk, which means "kind-hearted person who does good things for others." As a child caught up in the Korean War, she saw enough bad things for several lifetimes. It's a wonder it didn't dim her optimism and eye for beauty.

In keeping with family tradition, the westernized Surhs adopted English given names. Patricia In Suk became "Patsy" before she could walk. It just seemed to fit such a sprightly girl. Heartache and disappointment couldn't keep her down. She grew up to be patiently persistent. In 1963, when she came to America, her English was rudimentary. Now, as she mingles confidently with congressmen, mayors and diplomats, her command of the language is evident. When you watch her bantering with the waitstaff at a Korean restaurant along South Tacoma Way, however, ordering more kimchee to go with our bulgogi, one thing is abundantly clear: You can transplant a Korean but never sever the roots.

Patsy Surh O'Connell, an accomplished artist, founded the Asia Pacific Cultural Center in Tacoma in 1996. In the beginning, it was Patsy and a handful of friends and allies, determined to preserve the cultural history of Washington's growing population of Pacific Rim immigrants. Today, with thousands of donors and an army of volunteers, the center partners with schools, the military, government and industry "to bridge communities and generations through arts, culture, education and business." Its annual Lunar New

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\* In 2016, the average life expectancy in South Korea was 82.3 years, compared to 70.7 in North Korea and 79.3 years in the United States.



Patsy, second from left, at a traditional Korean tea ceremony. *Surh O'Connell collection*

Year celebrations have attracted upwards of 10,000 to the Tacoma Dome. Unsurprising, really. Asians are now the state's fastest-growing ethnic group, their numbers estimated at 603,000 in 2017. Of those, more than 100,000 are of Korean ethnicity. Nationally the Korean population has grown 41 percent since 2000. Patsy is one of America's 1.7 million Koreans.

THERE WERE only a handful in 1889 when Patsy's grandfather disembarked at San Francisco after a long voyage. Beyond the redwoods and across the Columbia, Washington was about to become the 42<sup>nd</sup> state. Diplomatic relations had been established between the U.S. and "the hermit kingdom" of Korea five years earlier. The first delegation of Korean diplomats was followed by a trickle of students. Patsy's grandfather was the second Korean to graduate from an American college.

Surh Byung Kyu died half a century later in the middle of the civil war ravaging his homeland, his hopes and dreams for a unified, independent Korea dashed. His son's family had fled Seoul as the communists pushed the South Korean army and its U.N. allies practically to the sea.

Memories of the Korean War are palpable for Surh Byung Kyu's granddaughter. Patsy was 7 when the fighting erupted in the summer of 1950. Patsy and her big brother, Ronny, climbed onto the roof every time they heard the telltale drone of approaching bombers. "B-29! B-29!" they'd shout. "Americans are here!" In the sky above at least. The communists were literally downstairs. The North Koreans appropriated the Surh



Patsy in Seoul after the communists occupied her family's house. *Surh O'Connell collection*

family's comfortable two-story house as a command post when they captured Seoul. Each day began with the soldiers hup-hupping around the room to the strains of a rousing marching tune on the Victrola. For the first few days, Patsy scampered downstairs to join in. Then her mother, voice hushed, pinched her little arm and said there'd be no more of that. They were in mortal danger. Mrs. Surh was pretending to be a widow. Her husband, an electrical engineer and successful capitalist who spoke excellent English, was in hiding, lest he be killed or taken prisoner. Whenever the coast was clear, they'd drape a blanket over the balcony rail. At first, it seemed to Patsy that "it was all a big adventure."

HER GRANDFATHER'S big adventure began in an era punctuated by peace and optimism. Surh Byung Kyu was 18, the son of educated parents from Korea's *yangban* aristocracy. These "scholarly officials"—required to pass the equivalent of civil service tests—were the Korean equivalent of China's mandarins. The arrival of American missionaries in the 1880s broadened Byung Kyu's horizons. His parents encouraged him to study in America.

Though he worked diligently to perfect his English and acquire an American high school diploma, college seemed out of reach. In return for room and board, he was working long hours on a California farm. Luckily, his mother had connections. When Patsy's great-grandmother learned that Korean diplomats were headed to Chicago for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, she asked them to interview her son. They were impressed by his language skills and affability. Byung Kyu was hired to work at the Korean Pavilion where he met the president of Roanoke College, a liberal arts school in Virginia that was cultivating a reputation for welcoming international students. Byung Kyu received a full scholarship worth around \$150 per year.

Most people he met weren't sure where "Corea" was. They definitely had never met anyone from there. Patsy's grandfather politely explained he wasn't a "Chinaman," Japanese, Filipino or Hawaiian. A newspaper reported that his eyes were "the color of burnt umber, looking out from a broad flat face that was yellow but not sunburned."

Byung Kyu, a serious student with impeccable manners and a winning smile, made



Her grandfather, Surh Byung Kyu, around 1898 when he graduated from Roanoke College in Virginia. *Surh O'Connell collection*

his mark at Roanoke College. He excelled at debate and became a fixture in the literary club, sporting “a natty straw hat.” He joined the Masonic Lodge and the American Geographical Society, became an Episcopalian and worked summers at the Korean Embassy in Washington, D.C. When he graduated with honors in 1898, the Korean ambassador and a member of Korea’s royal family were there to hear his ringing commencement address. The “ideal to which the best and bravest throughout the world” were aspiring, Byung Kyu declared, was “the principle of equal justice to each and all.” He denounced “communistic socialism” and said it was “an act of treason and an act of war against humanity” to violate the rights of a single individual.

Patsy’s grandfather went on to receive a master’s degree in literature at Princeton University in 1899, having taken “a special course in the science

of government” taught by Professor Woodrow Wilson. His goal was to “better prepare himself to serve his country, which he loves with truly patriotic devotion,” newspapers noted.

His career took off practically the day he set foot back in Korea. The emperor had taken note of his accomplishments in America. At 29, Surh Byung Kyu was appointed governor of Inchon, the nation’s central port. He was now a diplomat, trade czar and emigration official rolled into one, “credited for sending out the first 6,000 Korean laborers to Hawaii.” Next, he was appointed to Korea’s highest court, followed by a stint as minister of Education and Agriculture. Acting on his Western education and the influence of missionaries, he decreed that Korean girls must attend public school, a social reformation initiative that would face stout resistance in such a patriarchal society.

Surh Byung Kyu was director of the Korean Chamber of Commerce in 1905 when Imperial Japan, fresh from a resounding victory over Russia, strong-armed Korea into submission as a “protectorate”—a misnomer if there ever was one. Japan formally annexed Korea five years later and set out to crush its soul. Patsy’s grandfather was already “in exile,” as he put it. He had fled first to Russia, then to the British sector of the international settlement at Shanghai. The British appointed him deputy commissioner of their Maritime Customs Service. Patsy’s father, Surh Chung Ik—“John” to the family’s English-speaking friends—was born in Vladivostok in 1910.

BY 1932, with the Japanese growing more bellicose and fascism on the rise in Europe, there were 70,000 foreigners in Shanghai, including White Russians, Jews, Greeks, Koreans, Filipi-

nos and Frenchmen. It was the Casablanca of the Far East. As a consequence, “most Surh family members spoke Korean, English, Japanese and different Chinese dialects with varying levels of fluency,” Patsy remembers. Her father graduated from the University of Shanghai in 1933 and within a year was named chief engineer of China Radio Service Corporation.

Japan entered an alliance with Hitler and Mussolini and set out with ruthless determination to annex its resource-rich neighbors. Shanghai’s Chinese sector fell to the Japanese in 1937 after savage combat, with Chiang Kai-shek’s troops retreating to the interior. The British government declared its settlement “indefensible” in 1940. The Americans followed suit shortly thereafter. The roundups of foreigners were soon under way.

Patsy’s father was in a Japanese jail the day she was born, February 7, 1943. “They accused him of being a spy since he worked with radio and electronics,” Patsy says. Many prisoners dragged off for interrogation never returned.

Patsy’s mother visited the jail practically every day. Surh Young Sook Yoo was a beautiful, resourceful woman, educated at Korea’s most prestigious school for girls. Her family had fallen on hard times when her father died of tuberculosis in his 40s. Her arranged marriage to Patsy’s father—a handsome, wavy-haired young man with a roguish streak—was complicated by her inability to speak English. The clannish Surhs gave her a new first name—“Dorothy”—but proceeded to make her feel ostracized. The jail guards saw her in a different light. They admired her loyalty to her husband. Great with child, a 2-year-old in tow, she brought him clean clothes in exchange for his lice-ridden prisoner pajamas. They called her “pretty Korean” and predicted her husband would be freed before long.

The Japanese must have concluded that Patsy’s father was who he said he was—a multi-lingual electrical engineer, not a spy. He became the production superintendent at a Japanese-owned engineering firm in Shanghai.

After Japan’s surrender in 1945, the Surh family made its way back to Seoul by boat, truck, train and on foot. At one point American soldiers gave them a lift. For long stretches, however, they trudged along dirt roads, lugging their possessions. Five-year-old Ronny had a little backpack of his own. “My mother was eight months pregnant with my brother Freddy, so she was unable to carry anything very heavy. And there I was, not yet walking, still in diapers, riding atop my father’s backpack. They told me years later that they hid things in my diapers.”

Patsy’s grandfather, aunts and uncles also ar-



Her parents in traditional costume on their wedding day in 1936.  
*Surh O’Connell collection*



They changed into western-style clothes for another formal photo with the entire wedding party.  
*Surh O'Connell collection*

rived in Seoul before long. They all set up housekeeping in a three-story building. The men sought work; the women foraged for food; the children went back to school. An Asian iron curtain was descending across the Korean peninsula. In the new, anti-communist Republic of Korea, there was much rebuilding to be done. Patsy's father found a succession of good jobs. By 1950 he was the first general manager of the fledgling Korean National Airlines. Patsy went to a Catholic-school kindergarten and lived in a handsome, four-bedroom house with a sizable yard. Their lilac bushes were "the envy of the neighborhood." Patsy's vibrant watercolor paintings often depict flowers she grew up loving.

**EVERYTHING CHANGED** overnight on June 25, 1950. Artillery shattered the morning calm as panzer-like divisions of North Korean troops plowed across the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. "Our enemies looked just like us," Patsy says. "For a child, it was all beyond comprehension. Soldiers moved into our house. My father went into hiding. Why was this happening?"

Pretty soon the North Koreans declared they needed the whole house. Patsy remembers her mother's fortitude—and a close call: "She begged them, 'You have to find me somewhere else for us to stay.' So they found us a place two houses down in the same neighborhood. It had one room with an outdoor kitchen." That their maid remained with them was incongruous but a godsend. The poor woman had nowhere else to go and they needed her.



With her brother Ronny in Shanghai before the war.  
Surh O'Connell collection

Patsy's father usually hid in the ceiling until it was dinner time. Then, making sure there were no soldiers around, he'd slither down and eat rice with his family.

One day, my mother was late returning from her regular trip to the market, so we went ahead with dinner. When someone knocked on the door, my father hurried back to his hiding place. So it

was just me, my two brothers and our maid. A strange man came inside. He was a North Korean agent. Somebody had told the officials my mother was not a widow. So they sent this guy to find out if there was a husband. Freddy, my cute younger brother was 5 years old. He had some rice stuck around his face. The stranger put him on his lap and began gently plucking the rice off his cheeks. "Where's your father?" he said. In that instant I realized Freddy might point to the ceiling, so I said, "We don't have a father!" The man slapped my face. "I didn't ask you!" By then we were all just frozen in place.

Though it happened 67 years ago, every second of that incident is seared in her memory. Patsy brushes away tears. "It was one of the scariest moments of my life. I was only 7, but I grasped that my father's life was in danger."

The man snooped some more before departing. When Patsy's frantic mother burst through the door an hour later, they learned she had been waylaid by the authorities. They didn't want her around while they searched the house.

"We had to grow up fast," Patsy says. A neighbor girl sent to fetch water from a well came crawling back with a nasty shrapnel wound.

On another day, "I saw a body covered with a straw mat on a cart—bare feet sticking out—and a weeping woman surrounded by her kids. Then one morning the house next door got bombed. It was just chaos. My father came out of hiding, got an ax and tried to stop the fire. I saw the body of a person burned charcoal black from head to toe. It was leaning like a burned board against a stone wall. Even to this day I don't have to close my



eyes to see it. It's just so clear. You realize you have to be strong and find ways to survive. Today when I read about soldiers with PTSD who have gone through such terrible times, I understand what war does to a person."

IT WAS TIME to flee. Patsy's father hopped a plane because he was safeguarding an American friend's funds. The rest of the family boarded a packed refugee train headed 250 miles south to Pusan where the U.S. military and its allies had established a defensive perimeter. Today, high-speed trains whisk travelers from Seoul to the port city of 3.6 million in 2½ hours. In 1950, it took days, danger ever-present.

The excitement of her first train trip evaporated when Patsy realized she was privileged to be inside the train. Hundreds of other refugees were on top, holding on for dear life. "At night it was so cold for small children and elders. I heard horror stories about what people on top of the train had to go through." If a bone-tired adult clutching a child fell asleep, the child might slide over the side to almost certain death. Old people died the same way.

"We were very fortunate in our family that no one was harmed during the war. But I never felt we were victims. I think if you have that mentality it's really hard to get out of it. We were coping with the reality around us. My father never complained. Never said it's too hot, or it's too cold; never said 'I'm hungry.' My mother was also strong and resourceful. Despite the hard times, I was always an optimist."

At Pusan, Patsy went to fourth grade in an old streetcar. Her mother and other educated parents volunteered in the make-shift classrooms, anxious to ensure schooling would continue. The city was teeming with refugees and soldiers from around the world. South Korean and American forces were joined by units from England, Canada, Australia, Thailand and Turkey. "It was exciting, though I also understood that beyond the safety of Pusan many people were dying."

Patsy loved wandering through the city's enormous market, its stalls filled with all manner of still-squiggling creatures from the sea.

"I was an adventurous girl, always curious. I bought some whale meat, watched them gutting fish and unloading cuttlefish. On the way home, I always saw



With her teacher in a streetcar schoolroom at Pusan during the war. *Surh O'Connell collection*

people living under bridges. Now, every time I see homeless people huddled under freeway overpasses and off-ramps, I am filled with empathy and think about Korea during the war.”

PATSY’S ELDERLY grandfather broke a hip and was increasingly melancholy. Patsy arrived home from school one day to see a shaman dancing around the yard as her grandfather wagged a tree branch. They were trying to conjure the spirit of her late grandmother. When Seoul changed hands for the fourth and final time during the war, her grandfather returned to the capital to live with another son.

Surh Byung Kyu died at the age of 80 in 1952 as the city was bulldozing rubble to welcome President-Elect Eisenhower, making good on a campaign promise to go to Korea. Nine-year-old Patsy accompanied her mother to Seoul to attend the funeral of the Surh family patriarch. Educated in American colleges, he had risen to the highest ranks of Korean society, only to see his country brutalized by the Japanese and fractured by the communists. “In Korea we have a saying that when tigers die at least they leave their skins,” Patsy says, tears welling up again. “As a human being, especially from Korea, it’s important to make a difference.”

There’s an ineffable sadness—a concept called *han*—that scholars acknowledge is central to the Korean character. “In a relatively small nation with a long history of being invaded by more powerful neighbors, it’s a sense of incompleteness,” one writer observes. In an episode of *The West Wing*, President Josiah Bartlet (portrayed by Martin Sheen) summed it up like this: “There is no literal English translation. It’s a state of mind. Of soul, really. A sadness. A sadness so deep no tears will come. And yet still there’s hope.”

What Patsy’s mother endured in her marriage was beyond *han*. Her husband, prodded by colleagues, had exercised one of the unwritten prerogatives of his station as a business executive: He acquired a mistress, euphemistically referred to as a “girlfriend.” Patsy’s mother was devastated. “She loved my father and was a subservient, traditional Korean wife to a man who had grown up as the spoiled oldest son. My mother would cry in silence. It was just sad to see. The family strife was one of the reasons my grandfather and



Patsy, holding a squash, with her mother, aunts, grandfather and other grandchildren in Pusan during the war.  
*Surh O’Connell collection*

Uncle Errol moved back to Seoul.’

WHEN THE armistice was signed in 1953, Patsy’s father was largely absent. When he wasn’t at work, rebuilding Korean National Airlines, he was with his mistress. Patsy’s mother packed up the meager household goods. Husband or no husband, she was moving back to Seoul with her three kids. They would stay with Patsy’s Uncle William if their old house was uninhabitable.

They found it remarkably intact. However, the jewelry and other family treasures Patsy’s mother had hidden in a crawl space were gone. “People were starting to fix homes as best they could,” Patsy remembers.

“Every time I had the opportunity to go beyond my neighborhood over the next year, I knew things were changing for the better. Streetcars were running. New buildings were being constructed. My mother rented the upstairs to a doctor and his family, while our living room was rented to a woman who was going with an American soldier. The small room where I used to play was rented to one of my schoolteachers who had taken in her mother and sister. It was a busy house. I liked that. We did not see father and we did not ask our mother where he was.”



With her parents and brothers around 1961. *Surh O'Connell collection*

He had become president of an engineering and manufacturing firm, with scant concern for his family's financial plight. At one point, Patsy's mother took a humiliating job as a maid at an American military base, only to quit after one day. She sold the lone diamond ring she had kept with her during the war. Patsy was in high school when her father moved back home. "Everything seemed normal again and I thought we were the perfect family. I took piano, ballet and Korean traditional dance, and began taking private lessons on charcoal drawing after school. I also went to operas, symphony concerts and gallery shows with school friends." Then the family ruptured all over again. Her father was back with his mistress. At her mother's urging, Patsy periodically rode the streetcar across the city to beg him to come home. It was all so confusing. She abhorred his willfulness but missed him all the same. Her distraught mother, whom she dearly loved, was now resorting to a fortune teller for advice. Divorce was unthinkable. As conundrums go, this one was complex. Patsy was a dutiful daughter with one foot in old Korea and the other in its high-rise future. She was attending a progressive school whose founder inculcated girls with the notion that their generation was destined to play a key role in shaping modern Korea. Right or wrong, it also entered Patsy's mind that her mother could have tried to do more things her father liked. "I promised myself that I would have many interests so my future husband would not find me boring, and I would not have the same fate as my mother." She also came to see that above all you must be "true to yourself—strong and competent."

IN 1961, when Patsy was a high school senior, her father returned from a trip to the U.S. with a new job: director of the American-Korean Foundation, a postwar organization dedicated to providing "a mutual bridge of aid and an exchange of culture between the American and Korean people."

He promised he would clear the way for her to study in the U.S. Then, without a word of explanation, he left her dangling. It was too late for her to take the Korean college entrance exams. She pounded out "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog" on an English-language typewriter until her fingers ached. She was hired as a sales clerk at the U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Army's Post Exchange in Seoul, intent on improving her English and making it to America on her own.

Her enigmatic father now signaled he was proud of her gumption. One day when she awoke too sick to go to work, he called her manager in the house-



Practicing on an English-language typewriter in 1962.  
*Surh O'Connell collection*

wares department, astounding the man with his flawless English and obvious connections. Patsy won a promotion. Life with—or without—father was full of surprises. Mother, meantime, had hired a person in the know to help Patsy secure a passport. When her father casually announced they were going to see the American ambassador, Patsy was astounded. She sat silently, knees together, hands in lap as the men chatted amiably in English. She had been approved for a U.S. student visa. “However, even though he still had connections at the airline, I would need to pay my own airfare. This was my father’s way of saying nothing was free in life—something handed down from my grandfather.”

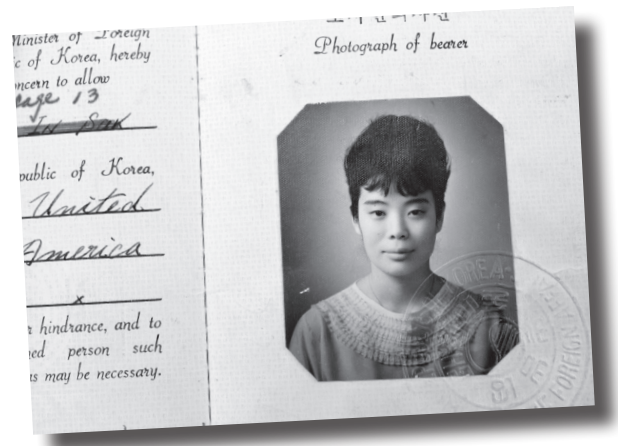
Patsy signed on as a chaperone with Holt International, an adoption agency. It would pay her airfare, and she would escort an orphan being adopted by an American couple.\*

As Patsy was packing, her father came into her room to offer a cautionary tale: “In America he had met people who did not have successful inter-racial marriages. He believed that when people came from different cultural backgrounds they were not able to communicate with each other.” It didn’t make much of an impression at the time. Besides, her aunts and uncles had spouses from other Asian countries, including Japan—never mind that there is a unresolved antipathy between many Koreans and Japanese.

ON THE TIRING flight to America, Patsy ended up caring for not one but two Korean toddlers. They cried inconsolably and clung to her neck all the way across the Pacific. Exhausted, Patsy worried she wouldn’t recognize her Aunt Hannah, who had settled in San Francisco years earlier. But as she surveyed the crowd greeting disembarking passengers, she spotted a smiling woman with an unmistakable Surh family face. Patsy’s new life had begun. It was September 3, 1963.

Patsy worked nights as a receptionist at the YWCA in Chinatown while attending the Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design. “Mr. Schaeffer was a classic, stylish Jewish man, immaculately dressed, with a tailored suit and pocket square,” Patsy remembers. Danish Modern and Asian-influenced interiors were the rage, especially on the West Coast. The

\* The adoption agency was founded by Bertha and Harry Holt, a devoutly Christian couple from rural Oregon. The Holts were stirred to action by a 1954 documentary on the plight of mixed-race “GI babies” languishing in Korean orphanages.



Her 1963 passport photo. Surh O'Connell collection

school attracted international students. Patsy had an eye for color. She excelled in her classes and stood out at social gatherings. As a hostess for a school function at San Francisco's historic fine arts museum, the de Young, she was stunning in a traditional Korean *hanbok* dress. Modeling jobs came her way. At the Korean Consulate's Christmas party for overseas students, Patsy bumped into a chum from the Army PX in Seoul. They resolved to move in together and found a tiny furnished apartment. They dreamily window-shopped at I. Magnin on the way to Macy's bargain basement and Woolworth's.

The two Korean girls had part-time jobs at the Presidio, the U.S. Army's San Francisco headquarters, Patsy at the NCO Club, her roommate at the Officer's Club. One night they double-dated with a pair of Army dentists to see a program featuring Korean performers. Patsy's roommate's date, Captain Wallace J. O'Connell, seemed to particularly enjoy the singing and dancing, having just returned from a tour of duty in Korea. "Wally" began calling Patsy. With her roommate's blessings, they started dating. It certainly wasn't love at first sight. They were both contemplative people. Mostly Irish, Wally was a dark-haired Catholic guy from Wisconsin. "And in the back of my mind," Patsy remembers, "I thought I should marry a Korean." However, the more she learned about Wally, the more she liked. He was a gentleman. His persistence sprang from a childhood spent chafing in the shadow of an older brother. He had practically survived on Twinkies through college and dental school. When he proposed 10 months into their courtship, Patsy accepted, vowing that this would not be one of the doomed cross-cultural American marriages her father had warned against.

Patsy and Wally O'Connell celebrated their 52<sup>nd</sup> anniversary 10 days before this story was published.

WALLY'S MILITARY career took them to Japan, Texas, New Jersey, Okinawa and back to California before five years in Indiana. Patsy's dream of coming back home to Korea came true in 1983. They spent two years in Seoul before Wally's last assignment, Fort Lewis. They loved it here, resolving to stay after his retirement in 1990. Along the way, their family had grown. First came two Irish-Korean biological sons, Kevin and Brian. Then, in 1971, a daughter arrived from Korea through Holt International. Karen Tricia Young Yi O'Connell



Patsy and Wally on their wedding day in 1965. Surh O'Connell collection

met her grandparents before her parents. Patsy had asked her mother and father to visit the orphanage to check on her infant daughter.

With motherhood, Patsy became a teacher's aide, Cub Scout den mother and chauffeur. Karen took gymnastics and joined her brothers at *Taekwondo* lessons. All three became second-degree black belts. Patsy immersed herself in learning about other Asian cultures and began taking watercolor lessons. In Indiana in the 1980s, Wally built her a studio in the garage. Patsy started entering paintings in juried shows and winning awards. During their two years in Korea, she had a one-woman show in downtown Seoul, delighted when friends and former high school teachers attended.

After Wally was posted to Fort Lewis, Patsy enrolled at Clover Park Technical College to brush up on her interior design skills. She opened a Korean Cultural Center on a shoestring budget and taught continuing education classes at Pierce College in Puyallup. The pace caught up with her. Her parents were in and out of hospitals in Seoul. One year she flew home three times. She couldn't continue with the cultural center, promising herself it was merely a goal on hold.

Wally retired, they built a comfortable home in Gig Harbor and in 1992 Patsy and a silent partner purchased a travel agency. In three months of 18-hour days, Patsy taught herself how to run the business. She joined a Korean artists' group, which led to the vice-presidency of the Korean Women's Association.



Patsy, Wally and their children with her parents. Surh O'Connell collection

Patsy and Wally brought her ailing parents to America to live with them. Wally had promised to help look after his in-laws while she worked at the travel agency. He was as good as his word, understanding the filial piety central to her Koreanness.

Patsy's parents died 10 months apart, her mother the last to go in 1997. In their shared elderliness, they had long since reconciled from the troubled earlier years of their marriage.

Patsy was now free to pursue her dream.

HER PASSION for the arts led to a seat on the Board of Trustees of the Tacoma Art Museum. After serving as president of the state's Korean American Artists' Association, she was named to the State Arts Commission. "I learned a lot from my work with the Korean American Artists' group, hearing compelling stories from immigrant artists who could not devote their time to painting because they had to make a living. So when they smelled the turpentine, they had tears in their eyes." Their work was as good as you'd find in any reputable gallery, Patsy says. They just lacked the organizational skill and connections to launch successful exhibitions. She felt strongly that Asian American kids—from kindergarten to high school—deserved competitions of their own. And as long as they were at it, why not feature performing arts as well?

Patsy reached out to other Asia Pacific immigrant communities in Pierce County, astounded at the cultural diversity she discovered. There were proud, talented people from no less than 47 Pacific Rim countries. Some were the sons and daughters of refugees from war-torn Southeast Asia; others had roots three generations deep in Washington State. Gary Locke, the grandson of an Olympia houseboy, was poised to become the nation's first Chinese American governor.

The downside of Americanization is that immigrants' children and grandchildren often begin to lose touch with their culture and language, be it Korean or Arabic, Tagalog or Spanish—especially when there's little interaction with other people of their ethnicity. "Because I married an Irish man and we moved so much in the military, I didn't get a chance to teach my children about Korea as I would have liked," Patsy says. Her voice was choked with emotion. "That troubled me. I dreamed of a place where language and culture could be passed down."



With Gary Locke, the nation's first Chinese American governor.  
Surh O'Connell collection





With students, staff and volunteers at the Asia Pacific Cultural Center. *Surh O'Connell collection*

In 1996 Patsy became the first president of the Asia Pacific Cultural Center. It acquired a home when Metro Parks Tacoma—tentatively at first—rented the fledgling non-profit a large old neighborhood center along South Tacoma Way. Before long, the place was buzzing with cultural workshops, cooking and language classes and kids' art projects. The Polynesians hosted luaus; the Koreans barbecued bulgogi; Samoans staged their rough-and-tumble traditional games and Japanese ladies presided fastidiously over traditional tea ceremonies. After two years, the city saw that the center was such a success that it said “just pay for the utilities.”

With a paid staff of 10 and hundreds of volunteers, the center now offers a wide array of programs, including a “Promised Leaders of Tomorrow” mentoring effort tailored to at-risk youth and a summer camp where kids learn about 15 Asia Pacific countries in 15 days. The center's first Lunar New Year celebration was such a happening that it had to become an annual event. There's a different host country each year. The event draws

thousands from all over the Northwest.

WHAT'S NEXT? Patsy points to an artist's rendering of a 390,000 square-foot project set for the Point Ruston waterfront development near Point Defiance. Condominiums, restaurants, a movie-theater complex and an array of other retail outlets are already sprouting at the site of a former toxic landmark, Asarco's copper smelter. The developers have donated 5.9 acres of land valued at \$5 million for the proposed new Asia Pacific Cultural Center. The design calls for a campus of striking modern buildings incorporating traditional Asian architectural themes. A spacious new cultural center building is the centerpiece, surrounded by retail outlets, a Uwajimaya-style grocery and housewares store, a food court, gift shop, gardens, galleries, classrooms and 200 housing units.

"We see it as a regional destination," Patsy says, another facet of Tacoma's emergence as a vibrant city in its own right after so many decades in Seattle's shadow. She points to the nexus of the Washington State History Museum, the Tacoma Art Museum, the Museum of Glass, the LeMay auto museum, UW Tacoma and the Tacoma Dome. "Look what's happening here," she says, noting that Tacoma's mayor, Marilyn Strickland, is an Asian-African American born in Seoul.

"How great would it be for other countries to know that America—*Washington State*—really embraces the culture and contributions of its Asia Pacific immigrants? Our goal is to open in 2021."

How much will all this cost? "Eighty-seven million dollars," Patsy says with a smile that says, Yes, that's a lot of money. "We can do it because we're persistent."

Like the tigers who leave behind their skins, Patsy Surh O'Connell wants to be remembered as someone who helped preserve Asian/Pacific Islander culture as part of the rich mosaic of a land of immigrants. "In America we concentrate on differences more than similarities. Sharing cultures in a nonthreatening way brings people together."

As a child, she knew war. The volatile hatefulness she sees around the world today, with Korea at the epicenter of potential disaster, make her yearn for peace. "Face-to-face relationships can make a difference. All this is in my heart."

**John C. Hughes**