KOREAN HERITAGE ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS

Group 1 – English, Grade 5-8
Dear Kendall,

An Nyung Ha Se Yo. That is hello in the Korean language. In case you do not know, I am half Cuban and half Korean. I am half Korean but I do not speak the Korean language. I am learning Spanish in school. My mother is Korean. She was born in Korea and lived in many countries before coming to the United States. She is the director of a multicultural choir and she is the only Korean. There are 20 members in it including my family.

On January 31st, 2004 we did something that most people don't even think of doing. Do you know what that was? Our choir sang in a concert and the whole program was in Korean. The concert was to celebrate the Lunar New Year and it took place in the Flushing Library Auditorium in Queens. My mother taught all of the members how to sing in Korean. People in the audience were shocked! My family friend videotaped
our performance and I can see and hear people singing along on the back of the auditorium. My mom cried and many Korean people cried with happiness and joy. The choir sang the Korean National Anthem, "Ae Guk Ga". The kids sang Korean children's songs. One of the songs was about clocks. The song says that no matter what happens, the clock would always be ticking, Tok Tak. Many members sang solos. The names of the solos were: "Wheat Field", "White Lily in the Thom Bush", "Psalm 23", "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and "Moon Light". "Wheat Field" was sung by a 17 year-old named Jacquelyn White. Soh Young Lee-Segredo, my mother, directed the choir and tried to handle teaching all of the songs. When I started to learn how to pronounce the Korean words, I was shocked. It was hard to believe that many of the Korean words were easy to say. Therefore, I want to encourage you to learn Korean and sing beautiful Korean songs.

The choir members had a chance to learn about Korean food after the concert. My grandmother made seaweed rolled rice called Kim Bap, fish called Seng Sun Jun, clear noodles called Jap Che and a rib dish called Gal Bee. Kim Bap has rice, vegetables, imitation crabmeat and yellow pickles. For Kim Bop, all of the ingredients are placed on square seaweed with white rice and rolled. Then it is cut into smaller slices. At the end, it is colorful and it becomes finger food.

When I go to Korean restaurants, I usually order Bul Go Gee which is marinated beef. Gal Bee is prepared the same way and it is ribs. My mother makes a dish called Man Doo which is a type of Korean dumplings. Man Doo is a mixture of beef or chicken or shrimp with scallions, garlic, tofu, bean sprout, onion, carrots filled into a round flat piece of flour dough. Most of the people wet the outside of the dough before closing it. Once it is prepared, you can steam, boil or fry it. My favorite is fried dumpling. You need to go to Flushing, Queens, if you want to find good, authentic Korean restaurants. You can explore many different Korean foods!

For our January 31st concert, I wore a Korean outfit called a Han Bok. It comes in three parts, a shirt, a jacket, and a pair of baggy pants. My Han Bok came in different shades of blue. The pants and jacket have fasteners which work like belt or buttons. My mother wore a pink Han Bok with many flowers on it. She wore very long shirt which draped all the way to the floor and very short jacket with two long strings. My mother has to wear many layers of undergarments each time she wears her Han Bok. It is beautiful, but not as comfortable as it looks.

There are millions of different Korean folktales and Korean stories. One typical Korean story is called “Older Brother and Younger Brother”. The older brother's name is Nol Boo and the younger brother is Hung Boo. Nol Boo is cruel by nature while Hung Boo is generous and loving. When their father died, Nol Boo inherited everything. He did not share anything with Hung Boo and kicked his family out. Hung Boo helps a bird which then brings three seeds back from the south. When the seeds grew into pumpkins and cut open, food, money, clothes, servants came out from the pumpkins. When Nol Boo tried to do the same and harmed a bird, he gets seeds as well. He plants them and three pumpkins were harvested. When Nol Boo cut them, spiders, trolls, snakes, and evil spirit came out. At the end, Nol Boo lost everything and Hung Boo gained everything. There are stories called “Two Marbles”, “Heavenly
Maiden and a Wood Cutter”. These Korean stories deal with good and evil, greed, kindness, and honesty.

Kendall, by now you know a little bit about the Korean culture through my experiences. It is beautiful and I suggest that you take out Korean books, videos and explore Korean restaurants. Try to learn and see if you like it. Who knows? You might even want to join our choir and sing Korean songs. My mom is still looking for new people like you!

Fondly,

Ujin Lee Segredo
Dear Donte,

How are you doing at Rhodes School? I miss the two years we were together in Mrs. Amos’ class. It would have been cool to be together in the 5th grade too. How’s Karla? Is she still in your class? Say hello to all the guys, especially Donovan. If you see Mrs. Amos, say hello to her too. She was my favorite teacher.

Let me tell you about this essay contest my teacher told us about. It’s an essay contest on Korean culture. I didn’t want to do it, but my dad got me interested in the contest. I found interesting things about Korea and Korean culture that I didn’t know about. I found many things about Korea—its history, geography, climate, products it grows, language and sport.

First, I found that Korea is a peninsula as Florida is and Florida is where my mom, brother, sister and grandmother live. They don’t live together because my mom lives in Tampa, which is on the west and my grandmother lives in Palm Coast, which is on the east. I have stayed with both my mom and my grandmother and they’re about three or four hours apart. It’s a long ride from one side of Florida to the other. Korean is now special to me because, just like Florida, it’s a peninsula.

A second reason Korea is now special to me is how it’s similar in some ways to Puerto Rico, which is as you already know, is where I am from. Before Korea got its name, it was called Koguryo. Before Puerto Rico got its name it was called Borinken, or something like that—I just asked my dad. About 80% of Korea is covered by mountains. Do you know that about 70% to 75% of Puerto Rico is also covered by mountains? Korea’s climate is almost similar to Puerto Rico’s climate except that it’s always hot in Puerto Rico. I think that Korea’s climate is more similar to Florida’s climate where it really can get cold. I also read that Korea has a small island off its coast. The island is called Cheju. Off the coast of Puerto Rico there also is an island, actually three small islands. Because the climates of Korea, Florida and Puerto Rico are
similar, many fruits grow in each of these places like pineapples, oranges, and mangoes. Hey, I just thought of something: My name Kanere begins with a "K" just like Korea!

Anyway, there are some differences. Puerto Rico and Florida are divided into many little villages. I don’t know how many, but there are a lot. Korea is divided into two big parts. There is North Korea an South Korea. They are two completely different countries. I don’t know where Korea is, but it’s next to Japan. A peninsula next to an island, just like Florida is next to the island of Cuba. This is another similarity that I didn’t know about. The capital of South Korea is Seoul. The capital of North Korea is (a hard one) Pyongyang. Did you know that there are more boys than girls in both South and North Korea? I think it would be bad because some of the guys won’t have dates.

This contest is an essay contest and I am writing in English. The writing in Korea is called Hangul almost like Spanish, well not exactly, but they both use phonics which is how some teachers taught us how to read. I really don't remember, but that’s what the book I got this information from says.

Do you know what other information I got? I got some things on sports. Koreans love to play soccer and baseball. You know that soccer is my favorite sport, but I like baseball too. Koreans have won the little league world series several times. I didn't know that. Did you? How about words? Do you know any Korean words? I know some now. Ginseng, that drink people buy in Seven Elevens that come in those little bottles is actually called “insam”. “Chima” is a skirt. “Chogorie” is a jacket and “Kat” is a hat made of horsehair. I would like to have a “jang” which is a chest. I could use one to put all the toys my dad tells me to pick up every day. You know, you have stayed over. I know my room is a mess. But I’m just a kid!

I also read something about the Korean War, but I don't want to talk about the war. It's too confusing just like the war now in Iraq. So let me tell you about Taekwondo. You know it’s like karate, but different. I already told you I took several classes in Taekwondo and I really liked it.

Do you know that my dad is going to buy a new car soon? We went to a couple of car dealers and we really like the Toyota Armada. it’s humongous. But I didn’t know that the Daewoo and the Hyundai are cars that come from Korea. Cool!

I’m glad my dad got me interested in entering this contest. I’ve learned a lot about Korea. I learned about the land, about the climate, the food that they grow, the language, the sports and the things that we buy that are made in Korea. Are you staying over this weekend? Ask your mom. Call me at my dad’s cell phone. Did you know that my dad’s cell phone is a Samsung? Guess where Samsung is from?

Sincerely,

Your best friend, Kanere
Dear Sun Ah,

Hi! It’s me, April. I’m writing this from Korea right now because I received a plane ticket to Korea because I won a Story Telling Contest. Of course, I had to tell the story in Korean. I’ll be staying here for another year to learn more about our heritage. I’ve been here for over 3 months and I’ve learned a lot in those months. I wanted to share it with you because you’ll be joining me here in a month. Our mothers said you could come, and I could certainly use the company of someone English.

I’ve been learning Jang-Ku (a Korean drum) and it’s pretty much fun and brainwracking, well easier than the piano anyway. It’s such a lot of fun watching them move their heads with the white strip of cloth flying expertly and playing their instruments at the same time. It looks pretty easy, but my teacher said that every move they make takes serious concentration and hard work. I’ve been trying to learn Kum-do for a while now, but I don't feel happy about it like piano. I’m just scared all the time that I’ll hit someone. I really should drop it.

Well, when I first arrived in Korea, my grandmother started to tell me stories. They aren’t fictional stories, they are stories about our Korean heritage. My grandmother said I needed to know this because it is my history and that it would be an
embarrassment not to know, but I think it’s because she doesn't want me to be like my mother. My mother can’t do anything related to Korean, I think my grandmother’s embarrassed about that. My grandmother said that Han-geul was created by King Sejong. I told her I already knew this, but she just told me to shut up and listen. Then she started telling me stuff I didn’t know, I thought it was fascinating. The original name of Han-geul was Hunminjeongeum and we used to use Chinese as our language. Our language was written in a Jiphyun Jun. Korean is totally different from Chinese, Chinese has over 10,000 characters while Korean has only twenty-eight characters. Chinese is written by symbols while Korean has an alphabet like English. During my stay in Korea, I hope Grandma will teach me how to write Korean and speak Korean properly. I want it to be flawless and I hope I won't be an embarrassment to her too.

My Grandma also told me about the Korean War and about the time when the Japanese took over. She was here during World War II but not the Korean War. The Korean War began when the North Korean communists started to invade South Korea. South Korea isn’t communist. Funny thing is--even though I’m South Korean, Raya calls me communist and starts laughing. Well, moving on, the United Nations called this a violation of international peace and demanded that they move out of South Korea. The North Koreans didn’t come out of South Korea, so the UN came along and decided that they had to be a part of all this. They asked its member nations to give aid to South Korea. Sixteen countries sent troops to help with the fighting, and forty-one countries sent food and equipment for the war.

Apparently, everybody was on our side. Unfortunately, China and the Soviet Union had to be on North Korea’s side because they’re all communist countries. The war continued for three years until the UN and North Korea signed a peace treaty, but nobody thought to make a peace treaty between North and South Korea. I also did a little research on this because my Grandma didn’t really like to talk about the war, and it happens to be one of the bloodiest wars of all time. Many people were killed, wounded and left homeless, those poor people.

The Japanese invaded Korea and left us helpless. We were unarmed while they had killing machines. We weren’t allowed to use our own language, have our own flags up, children being taught that the Americans were bad. At school they would have sticks sharpened and were told that if 3 girls took on one American it would have helped a lot. What nonsense! I particularly admire a girl that my grandmother told me about. Her name is Yoo Kwan Soon. She stood up for our Korean rights. That event was called Man Se Oon Dong. They sewed the flags and slipped one to each house. All the Koreans came out, holding their flags high and proud. Unfortunately, Yoo Kwan Soon and her friends were discovered. They were tortured and killed later on, but, now she remains as one of my heroes.

The Korean dramas here are so amazing too. Kwon Sang Woo is your idea of Orlando Bloom. I’d say the Korean dramas are cooler than American movies. Now that is a compliment coming from me. Korea’s heritage is much more interesting than American. (Hey, we can make it into a Korean drama.)

During dinner, my grandmother started telling me about the Korean foods as well. She does it every night. I’ve been eating so many spicy things here that I feel that if I go back to America, I won’t be able to live without it. Korean food is also very low in
calories. Seriously, you should see the girls here, they’re so thin. It makes me jealous. Kimchee is what we have everyday, no excuses. My grandparents love kimchee and if they didn’t have it, they’d die, kind of like you and cheeseburgers. Bulgogi, Kalbi and Bibimbap are others of my grandmother’s famous dishes. Wait until you try them, you’ll love it.

Well I’d really love to stay and chat a little bit more, but my Grandma’s calling me to eat dinner. What a coincidence! We were just talking about food. In my next letter, I promise to tell you more about Korea because I can’t fit it all into one letter, too much to tell, so little time, pen and paper. Oh, and when you come to Korea, call me Sue Jin because that’s what everybody calls me here. For some reason they can’t pronounce April.

Love,

Your best friend,
April or Sue Jin
Dear Gianna,

How are you? I just returned from my two-week trip to Korea. You can’t imagine how much fun I had within those two weeks!! I learned a lot about music, dance, martial arts, clothing, customs, homes, food, and even weddings. It was really an educational experience.

Korean clothing is so unusual. The traditional clothing is called *hanbok*, and is very comfortable to wear. It is appropriate for the traditional and older lifestyle. Even today, many Korean people, especially men, wear *hanbok* after coming home from work, in the evenings. Western clothing is mainly for outdoor wear. Did you know that the entire family wears their finest *hanbok* on special occasions, such as the New Year's Day?

I also went to my friend Krystal's wedding in North Korea. All the facts that I learned about Korean weddings were actually quite interesting, and very similar to Indian weddings. North Korean brides are said to be more beautiful than those in South Korea, and the South Korean grooms are said to be handsomer than North Korean grooms. I was told that if I brought a present to Krystal and Shin’s wedding (which I did), then I shouldn't expect for them to open it in front of me. The Korean custom is to open wedding presents in private. In ancient times, marriage ceremonies were performed in the bride's yard or home. This has changed now. The night before the wedding, the groom came to the bride's house riding on a horse, like in India. Their wedding was performed in a very traditional way which is why it was so fascinating! After the ceremony, the bride was taken to the groom’s home in a palanquin. It was sad to see the bride cry as she left her parent's home! The lanterns that were lit all the
way from the bride's to the groom's house also made me nostalgic about Indian weddings. It was fascinating!!

Thanks to this wedding, I was able to get an insight on the music and dance in Korea. Krystal's family made arrangements for all of us to see a performance of the famous **Cheoyongmu** (mask dance). We also were able to see the traditional **Hakchum** (Crane Dance), which was very interesting. Korean music is very beautiful to the ears. Sometimes, it's very soothing, and serene, and other times it's full of loud booms and bangs. If you like Janette's music from 'Sunday Charms', then you surely like Korean music. Believe me, Korea's music is much better.

All Koreans speak the same language, unlike in India. Koreans have come up with many different dialects in addition to the standard one in Seoul. The dialects are easy for other Koreans, from other parts of Korea, to understand.

I learned something very unusual about the Koreans. They are very cautious when they meet for the first time. They first try to see if they are members of the same clan. Then, they consult the genealogy to see how closely they are related. If they find out that one of them belongs to the older generation, they speak to them in a very honorable way. I found this very intriguing!

I was also able to locate some information of Korean foods. Like China, Korea's main food is rice, grown in many crops. As a matter of fact, rice is served with every meal. As you can see, rice is a big part of Korean food. This food is native to the country of Korea. Actually, at Krystal's wedding, the caterers served kimchee. I immediately remembered you, while eating the kimchee, because I was one hundred percent positive that you, Gianna, would love it! Kimchee is pickled cabbage with a very wide range of spices. It can also have radishes, and seafood. People use either spoons, forks, knives or chopsticks. Fruits and pastries can be offered for dessert. So, kimchee, rice and soup are three items served at MOST Korean meals. I had a true eating experience in Korea.

In previous days, a regular type of Korean house was a rectangular, L or U-shaped single-story structure, built mostly of wood and clay. The roof was low and was thatched with straw, or, for the more wealthy, roof-tiles. The simplest form of the typical Korean house consisted of a living room, a sleeping room and a kitchen, with the separate toilet, away from the actual house.

In a traditional Korean home, there is little furniture and seating is mainly on the floor. Bedrooms and dining rooms were not grand; a living room also played the role of a sleeping and eating room.

The room used by the females of the house was located toward the rear of the house and was used as a place for family gatherings. This room had wardrobes, bedcovers and other household supplies.

The master of the house occupied the front part of the house, which was also used as a reception room for guests. If he was a skilled man, his rooms had a desk, shelves, books and a small amount of cushions. Usually, the male superior would sleep in the women's room for the night.

Remember the tae-kwon-do classes Tanya used to go to? Well, do you know that tae-kwon-do is a Korean form of martial arts? (I just added that in, because I thought it was interesting).
I hope you noticed how much I learned from my visit to Korea. Next time I go there, I will make sure that you come along. I really feel you would enjoy it. The climate, language, food, weddings, customs, traditions, martial arts, houses, music and even dance are a big part of Korea today. When I take you to Korea, you can observe the many ways the United States, and Korea are similar and different. It'll be great!

Hope to see you soon! I'll definitely tell you more about my trip in detail when we meet tomorrow.

Your friend,

Mtali
Dear Friend,

Today, the world is full of new, exciting things to do. But it’s also important to remember the past. As a Korean, I take great pride in Korea’s customs and culture. A large part of my life is devoted to the arts, and over the years I have learned Korean dance. Let me tell you about this aspect of my life.

I have been studying Korean dance, called muyong, for about six years. Most of that time was spent just learning the movements and having fun with my dance troupe. I thought now would be a good time to learn about the background and history of Korean dance; after all, it has been present in my life for a long time.

Korean dance dates far back in history. It has many different origins because a variety of people danced, from farmers and villagers to the highest aristocrats. Korean drummers moved to the beat of their own rhythms. Formal court dances were performed for nobles and royalty. There are many traditional Korean dances in...
general, and each one is unique. Some of the dances have stories, and the dancer must express the story as well as their emotion in their movement.

Various religions effected Korean dance, including Shamanism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Shamans danced to practice exorcism. Ceremonies were held to honor Confucius, where people would dance. Buddhists danced in temples for religious purposes. Korean dance was also influenced by dance in other areas, like China.

Some famous Korean dances are the fan dance, hourglass drum dance, mask dance, and the court dance. My favorite is the mask dance because it is highly spirited and I have found that I have the most freedom when I dance. It is the only dance where we get to wear pants, and the rest of the costume is very simple. The court dance, on the other hand, requires a much more elaborate costume. This dance is also very different in the sense that there are slower motions, but they are executed with a regal air that gives the audience a sense of contained energy. There are different motions in the other dances we have learned, but no matter what dance I am dancing, the most important thing is that there must be energy.

Energy is an important aspect of many types of dance, even of those other than Korean. I have also studied ballet for eight years, bringing Eastern and Western cultures together in my life. And, as I have noticed, there are huge differences in the two kinds of dance. Korean dance focuses on the upper body, using the shoulders and arms. There is little leg movement, and the legs are usually hidden beneath a long skirt, but the leg techniques create the feeling that the dancer is gliding, rather than walking. In ballet, great emphasis is put on the feet, and the legs are exposed. Ballet is also danced on the toes, in point shoes. In Korean dance, steps begin with the heel. There is also a major difference in style. A Korean dancer's movements are generally heavy and into the ground, while ballet is airier, with an outward show of energy. Not surprisingly, it is difficult to get the two mixed up.

As important as Korean dance may be to me, it is not the defining characteristic of Korean culture. It does not affect most Koreans in everyday life. The role of Korean dance has diminished over the years. What makes it exceptional is that dance cannot be put into writing, and kept over centuries. It must be taught and learned, and passed down. The hard work and effort results in a practical, beautiful way to show others about the culture of Korea, and it will surely be well enjoyed.

There were many other things I learned while studying Korean dance, and I had lessons in life as well. Korean dance was my introduction to traditional Korean music, which I found was very different from Western music. There were exercises in creativity within dance. My dance troupe read a poem and created a dance to it, interpreting and expressing emotion through dance. And the audience must understand that emotion, so we also learned about stage performance, how to compel the audience, how to smile, how to cover a mistake, and how to enjoy ourselves on stage. I became closer friends with the girl I danced with, and we put trust and confidence in each other. Simple dance lessons became so much more over time.

Korean dance has made a lasting impression on my life. It taught me who I am and who I can be as a Korean. It enriched my knowledge and submerged me in Korean culture. I am proud of our dance troupe's dedication and hard work to have come so far. I think learning dance has truly benefited us.
Our very patient teacher says every week, "You must move with the same hope and spirit together." And we essentially are always together, bound by heritage, and we have the same background, the same customs. And that is why, friend, even in such a busy world, it is so important to learn, to live, and to love your culture.

Sincerely,

Donna
Dear Dustin,

I am very pleased to say that I have gone to Korea. I have learned several things about Korea’s customs and way of life.

Before the 1900’s, Korea was an agricultural society built on strong family ties. Almost all of the people lived in small Villages and worked on farms. People owed their loyalty to their families. The family’s interest was more important than that of the individual person. In many cases, grandparents, parents, their sons and unmarried daughters, and the son’s wives and children all lived together. The oldest male served as the head of the family, and all people were expected to obey their elders without asking any questions.

The Korean way of life began to change after Japan seized control of the country in 1910. The Japanese brought industry to Korean cities and took much farmland away from the farmers. As a result, many young Koreans moved to the cities to work. This movement weakened Korea's strong family ties.

The Korean way of life changed more than ever following World War II. The communists brought about great changes in North Korea. They taught many people to hold the interests of the nation above those of the family. Women were required to work, and the Communists established centers to care for children while their mothers
worked. In addition, the Communists took complete control of the economy, changing the North into an industrial society. These developments further weakened family ties.

Life in South Korea has also changed since World War II. The South’s economic and political ties with Western nations have brought South Koreans under the influence of Western customs. For example, Western clothing has become common in South Korea. Family ties in the South have weakened as young people continued to move to cities. The South Korean government, unlike that of the North, has not tried to force changes. As a result, traditions remain stronger in the South than in the North, particularly in the countryside. It is immensely important to show your respect by taking off your shoes before entering the house. It is also very important to bow your head to the people you are talking to, which shows you are honoring them and respecting their customs. It is very interesting to know about Korea’s customs and way of life. I really savored my visit to Korea. I hope you find interest in all of the interesting information on Korea and maybe one day you will visit there too!

Your friend,

Andrew
Dear Rachel,

Did you know that Korea is part of the biggest continent in the world, Asia? Well, it’s true, and many Korean people are very smart. Did you ever wonder why? Well, I did. I wondered how they got so smart. But now I know that school, of course, is part of the reason. But why aren’t other people as smart as they are? I figured out that in Korea their school system is different than the one in the United States.

Korean people go to school not only five but six days a week! Monday through Friday, they go to school from 8:30 – 4:00 and on Saturdays they go home at 12:30. They take seven classes that are 45 minutes each, sort of like ours. But in our school, we study almost the same subjects every day at the same time every day, while in Korea, they study different subjects and spend different lengths of time studying them. For example, they study Chinese Writing for 1 hour; Fine Arts, Moral Education and Music for 2 hours each; Physical Education and English for 3 hours each; and they study Social Studies, Math, Korean Language and Science for 4 hours each.

Not only do they have to work hard at school, but they have to work hard on their studies at home before and after school too. They have to got up at 6:30 in the morning, in order to clean up, study and eat breakfast. They also have a firm schedule at night. They eat dinner at 6:30, do their homework at 8:00 and have to be in bed by 11:00.

As you can see, Korean children are very busy. They have many tests and assignments that they have to pass in middle school which will determine which high school they’ll go to. Some people might say Korean children are unlucky because they have to get up at 6:30 in the morning and they stay in school until 4:00 p.m. But I think, they’re really lucky because, they have extra time and an extra half day of school when they can learn more. I would give anything to have that.

Yours truly

Nakeya Burnett
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