

A Korean family's bold move to the U.S. set wheels in motion for a future San Diego attorney



By Brian Cox

Attorney Justin Paik has to hand it to his parents. Their bold plan to correct his rebellious nature as a teen actually worked — which is fortunate because they put a lot on the line for his future.

When he was 17 and not thriving in the South Korean school system, his parents made the dramatic decision to move the family to San Diego, Calif., where they figured their oldest son would at least become bilingual — a skill that would likely serve him well no matter what career path he may take.

“They made a big sacrifice for my sake,” says Paik. “They took a leap of faith and brought us over here.”

Paik’s mother settled in San Diego with her three children while his father stayed behind in South Korea to continue overseeing a manufacturing business he owned. As the oldest child, Paik bore an added responsibility in the household where his mother didn’t speak much English.

“I relied on my mom, but she also relied on me,” he explains. “Everything major came down to me. I still feel the obligation to do well and to be the best I can be.”

The jolt of a new culture and a foreign educational system opened his eyes, Paik says. He realized for the first time that success would require greater effort, attention, and commitment than he had previously given his schooling.

“I changed my course,” he says. “My mother told me she had never seen me study that hard before.”

He threw himself into becoming more proficient in English and pushed for higher-level courses in math. He felt a responsibility to be a role model for his younger brother and sister and was newly motivated to get into a 4-year college. Teachers saw his effort and dedication and responded positively.

“The fact that teachers were invested in me was one of the big reasons I shifted my focus,” he says. “I started to think I could do something with my life.”

Since he was a young kid, Paik says he had carried a vague

ambition of becoming a lawyer. He remembers watching television coverage of a widely publicized government scandal concerning the misappropriation of education funds. The case enraged citizens around the country and the public was calling for the heads of the officials who had been involved.

A defense attorney appeared on television to urge calm and to advocate for the importance of a fair trial. Young Paik was impressed.

“I thought it was a noble profession to go after,” he says. “I don’t know why that stayed with me, but it did.”

The renewed attention to his studies paid off and Paik entered the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he pursued a bachelor’s degree in Global and International Studies. The choice of a major was a shot in the dark, Paik says, and is indicative of the fact that he had little career guidance early on. The first of his family to become a lawyer, he was figuring a lot of it out on his own.

It was at UCSB that Paik met his wife, Linda, who was a communications major.

“I guess my life was set from that point on,” jokes Paik.

The couple married in 2016 and now have a 4-year-old son, Lucas. Linda is an elementary school teacher.

After graduating from UCSB, Paik took a year off to work at a law office, intent on learning as much as he could about the legal profession. He also volunteered at the San Diego Superior Court to see how the court system worked.

At the end of the year, his resolve to be a lawyer affirmed, he enrolled at California Western School of Law, which offered him a full ride. During law school, he served as executive lead articles editor for California Western International Law Journal. He worked as a judicial extern for Judge Peter C. Lewis and for Judge Nita L. Stormes, of the U.S. District Court, Southern District of California.

His first summer internship was at Ferris & Britton, the firm

A Korean family's bold move to the U.S. set wheels in motion for a future San Diego attorney

where he is now a shareholder. He connected with the firm through the San Diego Bar Association's Diversity Fellowship Program, which aims to help firms recruit talented diverse attorneys by introducing them to qualified, diverse law students.

After earning his law degree, Paik joined a solo litigation firm where he quickly discovered he didn't have the confrontational spirit necessary to enjoy litigation.

When he learned over lunch with Mike Weinstein that Ferris & Britton was looking for a transactional lawyer, Paik jumped at the chance to return to the firm where he had made a good impression as an intern. He knew little about transactional law, but he was willing to learn.

The fit was perfect for his personality.

"I like love what I do," says Paik. "You're solving problems for clients. If you're dealing with other parties, there might be a clash of interests but we're trying to solve that issue, not fighting about it. We're trying to get the best for our respective clients."

He also appreciates that the probate and estate planning areas of his practice are applicable to everyone.

"It touches everyone's lives, one way or another," he says. "It brings me joy that I can walk people through it."

And his parents were right. Being bilingual has proved to be a tremendous benefit in his practice. He is active in the Korean American community, including having served on the board of directors for the Korean American Bar Association of San Diego from 2015 through 2019. He currently serves as vice president of the San Diego Korean American Coalition and is a member of the board of directors for Asian Pacific American Coalition.

"I still learn every day that a lot of folks in the Korean American communities are not familiar with estate planning," he says, adding that many of his clients are reassured when he speaks to them in Korean. "They feel more comfortable talking about their issues and what they want to see happen with their estate."

In addition, Paik is active in mentoring Korean American high school students who might be considering a legal career.

"I didn't have anyone who looked like me to guide me through the process," he says. "Hopefully, I bring something beneficial to them."

Paik credits Gary Moyer, his mentor and the managing shareholder at Ferris & Britton, with teaching him everything he knows. Having recently become a shareholder, Paik says he is excited for the firm's future. He hopes to expand his practice to represent more Korean American businesses not only in San Diego County but across Southern California as well.

Paik has been active with Primerus since first attending the Young Lawyers Conference in 2015. Last year, he went to the Global Conference for the first time as a step toward taking over the reins from Mike Weinstein as the Primerus contact at the firm.

"Our clients have needs outside of California and Primerus is a perfect way for us to connect our clients with attorneys in other states," Paik says, who is committed to cultivating the firm's role in the organization.

"I'm willing to talk to anyone who wants to have a conversation with me about my firm's practice or how we can help meet their needs," he says. "Feel free to give me a call and I will be available."