

# A legacy of leadership

*D.K. Lee's optimism and energy challenge Rotarians to dream*

By Susie O. Ma

During Korea's Joseon Dynasty, scholar Eon-juk Lee helped develop the Confucian ideals of loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, and trust. His contribution to Korean Neo-Confucianism earned him a reputation as one of the five great wise men of the East, and his work was honored with a Confucian school that still stands today.

Five centuries later, those same Confucian values have helped his descendant, Dong Kurn Lee, raise a family, build a business, and become the first Korean president of Rotary International. Dong Kurn, or D.K., has already generated widespread enthusiasm for his choice of RI theme, *Make Dreams Real*, and high expectations for his focus on decreasing child mortality and building membership. Known for his collaborative decision-making and vast social and business network, he plans to motivate, inspire, and cajole Rotarians into doing more than they might believe possible. To succeed, he will rely on the wisdom of his mentors, lessons from his father, support from his wife, and the proud traditions of his Korean culture.

"Koreans are very tenacious," D.K. explains. "They have a hungry spirit that comes from the country's devastation after the Korean War. So when Koreans concentrate, we work with great passion and determination."

## Father knows best

D.K. spent part of grade school and many summers at his family home in the village of Yangdong, where his famous Confucian ancestor did his scholarly work in the 15th century. The village is a tidy group of traditional tile-roofed and thatched straw-roofed houses built on a small rise of land accessible by an unpaved road. It is a three-hour drive south of Seoul.

RI President D.K. Lee in the Seoul office of his family business, Bubang Co. Ltd. and Bubang Techron Co. Ltd.



**“President Lee exemplifies the Korean spirit of hard work and service to others that has inspired**



**Rotarians in this country and all over the world. I have no doubt that his year as RI president will be fruitful as he joins the growing ranks of Korean leaders who are making their mark on the international stage.”** *South Korean President Myung-bak Lee, Rotarian and friend of D.K. Lee*

The spirit of this hamlet made D.K. the man he is today. The motto engraved above the entrance to the 99-year-old Yangdong elementary school instructs students to “Be an asset of society with creativity and integrity.”

“Most people from the countryside are diligent and never give up. People around here are like that,” he says, sitting at the kitchen table of his cozy Yangdong home – a replica of the original home. D.K. and his wife, Young Ja Chung, recently rebuilt the main structure and several other small houses in the family compound, retaining some of the original hand-hewn Korean pine timbers but adding modern conveniences.

In D.K.’s youth, his grandparents lived here as well, according to Korean custom. Nowadays, the home is largely

unoccupied because he and Young spend their time in Seoul, in Evanston, Ill., USA, at RI headquarters, or traveling. But this property, dotted with pine trees and magnolias and boasting a 600-year-old juniper that D.K. climbed as a child, is where D.K. and Young might eventually retire.

In Yangdong, D.K. learned lessons of discipline, humility, and generosity from his father, Won Gap Lee, a past district governor from Busan. His father taught him to discount any compliment by 50 percent, never boast about money and, most important, honor family, friends, and guests. All the goodies in the kitchen were saved for others. When D.K. was a boy, his parents hosted parties where the best food was served. D.K. remembers once whispering to an

D.K. and Young enjoy a walk around D.K.’s ancestral home in Yangdong



unsuspecting diner, “Don’t eat it all!” afraid there might not be anything left for him. Although he detested the strict rules at the time, he is now assiduous about carrying on the traditions of Confucian hospitality. It’s the reason he insists that colleagues share his lunch (literally cutting his sandwich in half) and why he and his wife rolled up their sleeves to help serve a meal to his district governors-elect at a busy Korean restaurant after a GETS session.

His associates are impressed by this traditional Confucian upbringing. “He was taught, ‘If it is worth doing, it is worth doing right,’” says



D.K. and Young gather the family to look at old photo albums in Seoul; D.K. and his father, Won Gap Lee, a past district governor (inset).



friend Bon Moo Koo, CEO and chair of LG Group.

D.K. left Yangdong for Seoul, to attend Seoul High School and Yonsei University, where he immersed himself in his studies and activities like the school newspaper. High school friend Yi-taek Shim says D.K. was a clever student and good at making friends. “He always spent lots of time on things other than study because he was interested in the public good,” says Yi-taek, former CEO of Korean Air.

Although D.K.’s father was the owner of a successful textile company, D.K. was no spoiled rich kid. After college and a required stint in the Korean army, he moved to San Francisco for several years to take business classes. His father didn’t give him much money, so D.K. worked summers as a dishwasher and, later, a busboy. “He purposely wanted me to have that kind of experience,” he says.

D.K. admired his father’s work in Rotary and his father’s Rotarian friends because they were wise and respected men in the community. In 1971, he became a member of the Rotary Club of Seoul Hangang, and again followed in his father’s footsteps when he became a district governor in 1995-96. Over the years, D.K. has served Rotary in numerous leadership roles, including RI director and Rotary Foundation trustee.

### The balancing act

D.K.’s Rotary work particularly impresses friends and business associates because he has accomplished it at the same time he’s expanded his father’s company. D.K. is chairman of Bubang Co. Ltd. and Bubang Techron Co. Ltd.,

a group of companies that manufacture electronics and home appliances. He’s nurtured the business from a modest textile manufacturer in southern Korea to a corporation with operations in Korea and China.

“He built up what he inherited from his father; he didn’t throw it away,” says college friend Woo Sik Kim. “It’s surprising because it’s not easy to do everything, but he did – Rotary, business, and family.”

At Bubang’s headquarters, in a busy part of Seoul south of the Han River, D.K. typically passes up the elevator to walk the six flights to his office. There, Rotary memorabilia – photos from international assemblies and conventions, Rotary flags and awards – are prominently displayed, and an RI directory sits close at hand on his desk.

D.K.’s eldest son, Dae Hee, works on the first floor, as CEO of one of Bubang’s offshoot companies, Lihom, which makes rice cookers and other home appliances. Dae Hee is learning the family business, much as D.K. did from his father.

D.K. and Young have three other children – daughters Hee Won and Hee Jung and son Joong Hee. They’re scattered between Seoul, Singapore, and New York, and three of the four are married with kids of their own. The youngest grandchild, Tae Kyung (T.K.), was born on D.K.’s birthday last October. D.K. and Young spent all night choosing just the right name for the baby, an important Korean custom, especially since T.K. is the oldest son of their oldest son.

The kids are proud of their father and his Rotary accomplishments. “All his energy comes



## D.K.'s friends speak

"D.K. is a very easy person to make friends with. When I introduce him to one of my friends, by the next day they have become better friends than me!" *In Sang Song, past RI director*



"According to the Korean media, D.K. is to nongovernmental organizations what Ban Kimoon is to intergovernmental organizations." *Bon Moo Koo, CEO and chairman, LG Group*

*Bon Moo Koo, CEO and chairman, LG Group*

"His devotion to Rotary is intense. Wherever he goes, he will do his best and people will look up to him." *Woo Sik Kim, former deputy prime minister of Korea and member of Seoul Muak Rotary club*



"When we were kids, sometimes getting three meals a day was difficult. Now that we have moved beyond that, many Korean leaders talk about helping others, so the timing of D.K.'s presidency is perfect."

*Yi-taek Shim, former CEO of Korean Air and member of Seoul Hangang Rotary club*

"We want D.K. to do well as RI president and bring honor upon Korea." *Kyung Shik Sohn, chairman, Korean Chamber of Commerce & Industry and member of Seoul Pukak Rotary club*



D.K. bows to members of his club.

from his passion for Rotary," says Dae Hee. "He also has a lot of support from my mother."

Young plays a quiet but vital role in her husband's work. She sees her primary job as keeping D.K. organized, prepared, and healthy. Sometimes that means ironing his clothes, sometimes it means listening while he practices his speeches, and sometimes it means being fresh for a Rotary event right after a lengthy plane trip. She tends to be in the background when on Rotary business with D.K., but on her own she is bold and charming, deftly navigating the congested streets of Seoul in her car, chatting freely with Rotarians about their life in Evanston, and making friends with children during a visit to a Rotary project.

Accompanying D.K. on his visits to such projects, Young says, has given her a greater appreciation of the impact Rotarians have on their communities. She was particularly moved by a visit to India where she saw doctors operating on patients in a mobile medical unit. "India is a big country with a lot of people in need, similar to our country after the Korean war. I think their situation is improving with the help of Rotarians," she says hopefully.

### Friends in and out of Rotary

Rotary, business, and family are the pillars of D.K.'s life, but friends also rank high on his list. He considers socializing his hobby, especially as he no longer has time for golf.

D.K.'s list of friends reads like a Who's Who in Korea – the South Korean president and prime minister, the UN secretary-general, the heads of universities and conglomerates. These leaders consider D.K.'s involvement in Rotary a higher calling, and they are proud to see him take the helm of an international organization.

On a recent night in Seoul, D.K. and Young head straight to a dinner party after the 14-hour-flight from Chicago. This is a meeting of the Well-Being Club, as D.K. and friend Woo Sik named it. It's a place to talk freely.

Dinner this evening is at the Grand Hilton Hotel. Besides D.K., there is Woo Sik, former deputy prime minister of Korea; Seong-soo Han, the Korean prime minister; D.S. Hur, chairman and CEO of GS Caltex; Wu-Yeong Bang, chairman of *Chosun Ilbo*; Jong-Yong Yun, CEO of Samsung, and their wives. The couples talk comfortably about American politics – Hillary, Obama, McCain. They dissect details of the Hispanic vote and discuss whether McCain's past occurrence of skin cancer should be a factor in the election. They also argue about which candidate would be best for Korea.

Prime Minister Han interrupts the conversation to interject, "D.K. Lee is one of our best representatives. So many Koreans are looking forward to his service in the cause of Rotary International."

To meet these high expectations, D.K. often sacrifices sleep, generally getting less than five hours a night. Up by 7 a.m., he flies from appointment to appointment in Evanston or from speech to speech on the road. In the evenings, he walks briskly on his treadmill while watching CNN, and then sometimes works late into the night on company business. “He is almost indefatigable,” says Mike Pinson, aide to the president “He always has three or four things going on, and he moves quickly. It takes an army to keep up with him.”



D.K. visits his elementary school in Yangdong

D.K. tries hard to build relationships with his fellow Rotarians, and solicits the opinions of those around him. “Too many times people only talk to close friends, whereas D.K. wants to be sure all areas are well represented if we are to be an international organization,” says Rotary Foundation Trustee John Germ.

This inclusive decision making – along with his hospitality – endears him to those he works with. “His governors-elect love him,” says Mike. “He has tough goals for them, but it’s nothing he hasn’t done himself.”

Those goals include ambitious plans to increase membership by 10 percent to 1.3 million. The more Rotarians there are, the more work can be done, D.K. reasons. He also wants to visit as many clubs as possible. “I realize that grassroots Rotarians want to see their leader,” he says. “A country might have a long Rotary history but no visit from the president.”

D.K. will focus on polio to meet the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s US\$100 million challenge grant and reduce the number of polio-endemic countries. He will also carry on Past RI President Wilf Wilkinson’s emphases on water, health and hunger, and literacy, but with a new twist: reducing child mortality. The seed of this idea was a visit to Africa where he saw women who were too malnourished to nurse their babies. Much of the work Rotarians are already doing, such as providing clean water, better health services, and hunger relief, go hand in hand with reducing child mortality, D.K. says.

Past RI President Luis Vicente Giay says that D.K.’s child mortality focus resonates with everyone. “When you talk about children, people immediately react because children represent the future. Rotarians, NGOs and government representatives are all highly interested in reducing child mortality.”

“It’s a problem we cannot solve in one year,” D.K.

acknowledges, “but there is a Korean proverb that says ‘Starting is half the work,’ so I am motivated to start the job.” He also promises to dedicate himself to decreasing child mortality long after his term ends.

D.K.’s collaborative spirit means he relies on many friends for help, but the man he trusts most is his Rotary mentor, In Sang Song. The two became close in 1994, when D.K. was a district governor-elect and In Sang was RI director. “D.K. impressed me as the most enthusiastic governor-elect I had ever met, with his outgoing personality and desire to learn everything,” In Sang recalls. The two had much in common and worked closely together.

One goal that D.K. and In Sang share is the desire to repay the debt they believe Korea owes the international community for aid during and after the Korean War of 1950-53. “Korea was so poor. Many international organizations and governments helped build the country back up,” D.K. says. “Now our economy is booming, and Koreans all want to give back some of what was given. That’s why Rotary in Korea is growing like our national economy.”

When D.K. became a Rotarian, his father told him, First, never miss a meeting, and second, do not expect any personal glory from Rotary. Won Gap Lee also told his son that the competition for leadership positions in Rotary was fierce and, not wanting D.K. to be disappointed, counseled leaving those jobs to others. When club and district leaders suggested that he become district governor, he resisted as long as he could, remembering his father’s words. By the time D.K. became district governor, in 1995, his father had passed away. “He would have told me to become the best DG in the world – this was my destiny,” he says.



D.K. and friends Seong-soo Han, the Korean prime minister (middle) and Woo Sik Kim, former deputy prime minister (right)

D.K. had a phenomenal year as governor of District 3650. He took President Herb Brown’s membership challenge to heart and, at In Sang’s urging, created 32 new clubs and signed up almost 1,800 new Rotarians in his district. D.K. won the Calgary Challenge in 1996 for his achievements, and membership has been his forte ever since. Now, as he takes on a job his father never imagined for him, D.K. reflects on the reaction of this strict, but nurturing man.

“If my father were alive he would be my wise adviser. I know he would be proud.”

*Susie L. Ma writes for The Rotarian and Rotary.org.*

*For more about President D.K. Lee, go to [www.rotary.org](http://www.rotary.org) after 1 July. ♦*