



Unconventionally Exceptional

By Misti Echols

DANNY KIM IS A JUNIOR AT EAGLE'S LANDING CHRISTIAN Academy. In the United States on an education visa, his colorful journey to Stockbridge, Georgia not only reveals a lot about him, but also exposes some unexpected truths about the American experience.

To say Danny is an exceptional student is an understatement. He made a perfect score on the SAT and consistently makes the highest marks in his Advanced Placement classes. Because of his academic success, this past year he attended an invitation only, summer pilot program at Brown University, which focused on cultivating socially responsible leadership. He recalls that the training also included instruction in discovering his true passions.

As a native of South Korea, Danny says the most challenging aspect of studying in the U.S. has been learning the English language. He first traveled to America to attend ELCA in the seventh grade. In addition to traditional subjects like math and science, his middle school schedule included a rigorous class in Bible and apologetics. Danny reflects, "I am particularly thankful for my Christian education." He explains that when he attended a boarding school in New York for his ninth grade year, he was constantly challenged regarding his Christian beliefs. He would often call upon the knowledge he gained during middle school to defend his faith.

Danny says that his ninth grade year in New York proved to be a turning point in his life. He recalls, "I was not only exposed to different religions and cultures, I was also forced to examine my own beliefs and be prepared to defend them from constant attacks of fellow students." Danny says the confidence he gained by standing up for his faith encouraged him to try other challenging tasks, even tackling the adventure of touring New York City on his own.

He acknowledges a significant difference between the South Korean educational culture and his American experience. Danny returned home to

South Korea for his tenth grade year and observed a stark contrast to his time in America. He remembers observing his South Korean classmates studying all of the time. Their parents drive them relentlessly to perform well on tests. Unfortunately, South Korea has a very high teen suicide rate, which Danny attributes to the pressure students feel to achieve educational success.

In contrast, Danny acknowledges that students in America pursue a myriad of interests. He has noticed that colleges and parents want to see achievements in a variety of pursuits. While Danny remains committed to good grades, he says he enjoys the opportunities to have a more well-rounded experience.

Danny's parents continue to live in South Korea. He talks with them on a daily basis. In fact, he admits, "My Dad is my best friend. I talk with him about my future plans and choices that I need to make." Danny respects his father's opinion. As an elder in his local church, Danny's father has always been committed to showing Danny how to live out his faith. Danny recalls going on a mission trip with his dad and talking about his passion for the mission field. Danny was moved by the tremendous need he observed, which kindled a desire to pursue a profession where he could return to a rural area and provide compassionate care.

As time has progressed, his desire to share the love of God with others has not changed. However, Danny is now exploring opportunities to help in alternative ways. For example, he is looking at attending Princeton University and pursuing a course of study in governmental policy-making, where he will be in the position to influence entire countries for the furtherance of the Gospel.

Danny's life has been forever changed by his time here in Henry County. He has learned to defend his faith and has gained clarity about God's purpose for his life. However, when asked to identify his favorite things about Georgia, he smiles and without hesitation says, "Sweet tea and the Chick-fil-a sandwich."