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Yonhap Interview) American Adoptive Father Launches Campaign to Help Unwed Korean Moms

By Kim Young-gyo and Jane Jeong Trenka
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Just one year ago, Dr. Richard Boas, the American father of an adopted Korean girl named Esther, was financially helping other Americans so they could adopt children from overseas.

However, Boas' perspective radically changed after visiting South Korea late last year. Now, he is an activist for the rights of single and unwed mothers and their children. Moreover, he has become a staunch supporter of domestic adoption within Korea.

"Isn't it in the best interest of a developed society -- any society that loves its children -- to support them in whatever way possible?" Boas asked in an interview with Yonhap News Agency earlier this week.

The ophthalmologist from Connecticut was in South Korea during the past week meeting lawmakers, academics and social workers to promote not international adoption, but family preservation.

Almost 20 years ago, Boas and his wife adopted Esther, believing that they would be able to give her a better life in the United States.

"As grateful as I am that Esther came into my life -- and that I had the great privilege of bringing her up, of being her father and seeing her grow into a fine young woman -- it pains me to see any woman give up her child because people and the government won't support her," Boas said.

The Korean international adoption program began in the aftermath of the Korean War, peaking in the mid-1980s when over 8,000 children a year were sent abroad for adoption, mostly to the United States. In the 1990s and beyond, the "problem" of single mothers in Korea has provided a new supply of Korean children for the West.

The number of South Korean children sent abroad for adoption abruptly dropped as a result of media coverage of the program during the 1988 Olympics, and has hovered around the 2,000 mark since 1991, according to Korean government data. However, along with China, Russia and Ethiopia, it is still one of major "sending" countries to the U.S., according to the annual U.S. State Department report on "orphan" visas.

Nearly all internationally adopted Koreans in the past few years have come from unmarried and single mothers. South Korea not yet ratified the 1993 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, while the U.S. has signed but not yet implemented it. North Korea has no international adoption program.

South Korea, the world's 11th-largest economy, has been criticized both at home and abroad for its low rate of domestic adoption. Government figures show that there have been about 87,500 domestic adoptions versus 158,000 international adoptions since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Even though the government is now promoting domestic adoption, Confucianism, which stresses patriarchal bloodlines, and social stigma against unmarried and single mothers and their children are commonly cited as the reasons for high relinquishment and low domestic adoption.

South Korea ranks 53rd in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD's) Gender Empowerment Ranking, between Chile and Botswana.

"I had the sense of almost rescuing a child from what seemed like a very dismal fate in Korea," Boas said of Esther, whom he adopted when she was three and a half months old. She is his third child, in addition to two biological children.

With his children grown, Boas closed his medical practice and started a program with other Connecticut adoptive parents to help people adopt internationally. The Adoption Foundation at Family and Children's Agency financially aided about 15 families to adopt children, including special needs children and siblings.

However, Boas' view of international adoption changed radically when he visited South Korea for the first time in October 2006 and met a group of unwed mothers who had already made arrangements to give up their children, even before delivery.

"When I met the moms, I started asking myself questions that the other Americans weren't asking," Boas said. "Why would these moms give up their babies? Isn't it the right of any birth mom anywhere in the world to bring up her child if she's capable and loving? Why are these kids not being absorbed into Korean society, either by their birthparents or by domestic adoption?"

The rate at which unwed mothers relinquish their children in South Korea, estimated at 70 percent, comes as a shock to Americans, where fewer than 2 percent of unwed mothers relinquish their children for adoption.

After meeting healthy and seemingly capable Korean unmarried mothers, who were nonetheless sending their children overseas for adoption, Boas wondered, "Why am I favoring so much international adoption when it doesn't need to be necessary? This is like the tail wagging the dog." Boas returned home to Connecticut, unsettled about what he had seen in Korea. He read about the South Korean social welfare system in comparison with Western European countries and the U.S. Then he encountered an article by Marie Myung-Ok Lee, the Korean-American author of "Somebody's Daughter," who had studied Korean birthmothers.

"She became aware that the effect (of international adoption) on these mothers is devastating. They learn English just so they can get a phone call from their child 20 years later. They still long for their children," Boas said, explaining why he turned his attention to helping Korean mothers keep their own children.

Through his foundation affiliation, Boas now provides funds to the San Francisco-based foundation Give 2 Asia, which also maintains an office in Seoul. In turn, Give 2 Asia supports such organizations as the Single Mothers Network, the single and unwed mothers' group home Aeranwon and the Korean Women Workers Association.

"I think the problem, in retrospect, was that so much of this has been adoption-driven ... I understand some years ago the agencies in Korea even competed with one another to try to find all the adoptable kids they could. It may be in the best interests of the adoptive family, but children are by definition helpless. They can't make requests. They're not asking to go overseas."

Boas said that domestic adoption can also help boost South Korea's declining population; with a 1.13 percent birthrate in 2006, the country has the lowest birthrate in the OECD.

The practice of international adoption has become "business as usual," Boas said, but now "Koreans have a golden opportunity to really evolve and do so well by these kids and their mothers. I think when you really come down to it, the economic price and the social price is relatively small. I think it's much smaller than the price that everybody is paying now."

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