

# Korean siblings learn from, educate their high school peers here

**By Melody Simmons**

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There are movies, pool parties, hamburgers, celebrity gossip and, of course, slumber parties with other teenage girls. All of which struck Cathy Kwon about her new life in the U.S. – and whether or not she would be able to fit in.

Kwon and her brother, Ohsung, are two of the 108 exchange students enrolled in Archdiocese of Baltimore schools this fall. She is a rising junior at Mount de Sales Academy in Catonsville, and he will be a sophomore at Loyola Blakefield in Towson.

Both live with host families near each school – and rarely see each other during the school year. They said their parents sent them from their homeland in Seoul, South Korea, to immerse them in a different world, academically and culturally.

“It was a big transition for me,” said Cathy, 16. “I can see the difference between a Korean education and an education here. Now that I’m used to it, I can find both bad and good. I want to go to college in the U.S. After that, I might just keep living here.”

Both said the language barrier was huge at first, but with time, and new friends, they have been able to assimilate into the unique culture of their respective schools.

## **‘It’s kind of different’**

Ohsung, 14, is involved in several after-school clubs at Loyola, including cyber security, robotics, the car club and table tennis. All have helped him build bridges to American life, he said earlier this summer, before he and Cathy embarked on a 17-hour flight to Seoul to spend a couple months with their parents, Youngkyong Kwon and Hyoungwoo Choi (in Korea, the wife keeps her maiden name).

He noticed immediately a difference in the approach to academics.

“In Korea, it’s more strict,” Ohsung said, a sentiment echoed by his sister during a separate interview. “In Korea, we don’t have quizzes and tests; we just have a huge midterm and final. For math and science, it’s kind of different. In Korea, we mix geometry with science.”

While Ohsung is not the first exchange student at Loyola Blakefield, according to John Feeley, its director of admissions, the administration there hopes to attract more students from overseas.

“Based on Ohsung’s success and integration in our community here and his contribution, we will probably expand that program with the 2016 freshman class,”

Feeley said.

Despite the challenges of culture and language, Feeley said foreign students are “asked to explore their spiritual side through a study process in and out of class.”

“That is much harder for them in a Catholic school,” Feeley said, adding that it has worked in the past because of the strength of host families.

Ohsung lives with the Goldsboro family, parishioners of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland. Four of their five sons are current Blakefield students.

Exchange students are often identified for Catholic schools by local exchange and relief agencies, Feeley said.

“They will have your school’s profile and can screen the students for you,” he said.

“They can look at the academic qualifications and (for Blakefield) whether they have an open personality that would fit in our community.”

Ohsung attended eighth grade at Trinity School in Ellicott City in 2013-14, when his sister entered Mount de Sales. He said that helped ready him for Loyola.

Cathy was born in Oregon, where her father was a graduate student, and was 9 months old when the family returned to Korea. She aspires to remain in the States at a top-tier college, such as the University of California at Berkeley, where there is a large Korean and Asian population.

“My parents have spent so much for me to go here,” she said, “I want to pay back by graduating from a good college and earning money.”

Her life at Mount de Sales has been rewarding. The school enrolls two other Koreans, and Cathy said she has tried to be there for them. She said she misses her parents terribly – and sometimes cries when they speak by phone.

“It was really hard at first,” she said, of trying to fit in. “Because of the cultural difference and how people talk and have conversations, the reaction is different. Now that I’m used to it, I have a lot of friends. I think that because I was an international student, they started talking to me, so then I got to have more friends. They found it funny sometimes; I told jokes they didn’t understand.”

### **Exchange works both ways**

Dominican Sister Thomas More Stepnowski, Cathy’s religion teacher in freshman year, said she helped other students to see a new world.

“Cathy brings a glimpse of the universality of the Catholic Church,” Sister Thomas More said. “When we approached feast days, such as All Saints or Christmas, Cathy shared with us how the Catholic Church in Korea celebrated. Students benefited by learning how to explain American customs or traditions, such as Thanksgiving foods and St. Patrick’s Day.”

Last year, Cathy traveled with her host family, the Zieglers of St. Paul in Ellicott City, whose daughter, Maria, is also a rising junior at Mount de Sales, during the Christmas break to South Carolina and Florida. She said that, too, opened up a new

part of the U.S.

When she Skypes with friends in South Korea, they ask about life here.

"My friends," she said, "ask about different rumors - like 'do they all have guns?' I asked my friends, do they all have guns in their house? They also wanted to know 'do they always eat hamburgers?' And I told them they have other food, other than hamburgers and pizza.

"They also wanted to know are there any celebrities? My friend is obsessed with Hollywood stars like Leonardo DiCaprio. She thinks she's going to marry him or something."

At a slumber party last year, Cathy and her Mount de Sales friends Skyped with her friends in Korea, which led to laughter, comparisons and learning.

"They enjoyed it," she said. "I taught them some Korean words like 'hi' and things that sound like 'onion.' The fact is that I'm not that really different from them. Sometimes, I can be a little weird, but it's not like a bad thing. They accept it - they know I'm from a different country, and they accept me."