

Escaping North Korea

Mike Kim

Mike Kim is an author, consultant, and North Korea specialist based in Washington DC. He is the author of the Wall Street Journal featured book "Escaping North Korea", a current events memoir about his experiences at the China-North Korea border helping North Koreans escape the regime.

In November 2004, I was in northern Laos standing in the back of a truck with six angry soldiers pointing their AK-47s at me. I was leading two North Korean refugee women through the 6,000-mile modern day underground railroad that begins in North Korea and runs through China, and South-East Asia. We hoped to gain asylum for them in South Korea. We had just illegally crossed the border from southern China into Laos and had been captured by border patrol soldiers. As I stood there with my hands in the air, I thought to myself, "How in the world did I ever get myself into this?"

In *Windows of the Soul*, Ken Gire wrote, "Stories give us eyes other than our own with which to see the world." He offered the following prayer: "Reveal to me through stories something of what it is like to walk around in someone else's shoes. Show me something about myself in the stories I read . . . *Enlarge my heart with a story, and change me by the characters I meet there*" (emphasis added).¹ North Korea in its current state doesn't have much it can offer the world, perhaps just its inspirational stories of hope.

It's my hope that your heart will be enlarged by these stories and that you will be changed by the characters you meet here. We can learn a great deal from the North Koreans, the

refugees in particular. They call me *Sunsaengnim*² (Teacher), but I have learned so much more from them. It's also my hope that some in the international community will be mobilized to take action by their stories, which teach us much about North Korea and the plight of its people. The North Koreans have much to teach us about life too. When I travel and speak about the plight of North Korea, at least one person usually comes up to me and say, "Thank you for your talk. Today I have learned that I really don't have much to complain about." I have often thought that if the North Koreans can scale their mountains, then I can make it over this next hill of mine.

My life was changed by these people and these stories, and it is my hope that they will somehow touch and inspire you as well.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Mike Kim, was a guest speaker invited by the KCKCC Intercultural Center in April, 2011.

"On New Year's Day 2003, Mike gave up his financial planning business in Chicago, Illinois and left for China on a one-way ticket carrying little more than two duffle bags. While living near the North Korean border, he operated undercover as a student of North Korean taekwondo, training and competing under two famous North Korean masters from Pyongyang—eventually receiving a second-degree blackbelt."

During his time in China, he learned of the hundreds of thousands of North Koreans fleeing to China through a 6,000-mile modern-day underground railroad, which runs from Pyongyang to Bangkok, in search of food and freedom. He founded Crossing Borders, a nonprofit dedicated to providing humanitarian assistance to North Korean refugees which has testified at a US congressional hearing and has been a long time contributor of the State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report. Mike frequently appears in the media: He has appeared on CNN Anderson Cooper 360 and it was after his interview on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart that there was interest from Hollywood in turning

Escaping North Korea into a motion picture. A team of producers and writers are currently developing the script, with the book-to-film project represented by William Morris Endeavor.

Mike lectures to audiences worldwide about his experiences at the China-North Korea border and has now shared his stories of inspiration, courage, and hope on five continents. Mike resides in Washington DC where he is a consultant and term member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

REVIEWS

“The power of ‘Escaping North Korea’ stems from the stories Mr. Kim tells. During his four years in China, he met hundreds of escapees from the North. He reconstructs their tales -- of the privations of daily existence in North Korea, of life on the lam in China -- in heartbreaking detail... There are many heroes in Mr. Kim’s book, not least the author himself.” –The Wall Street Journal

“His intrepid effort to help four North Korean teenagers avoid arrest and repatriation on the journey from northern China to the British consulate in Shanghai is riveting, as is his insider knowledge of the perilous route refugees navigate across the borders of China, Laos and Thailand.” –Publishers Weekly

“[A] fascinating account of [Mike Kim’s] efforts to smuggle North Korean defectors to freedom in the South.” –New York Review of Books

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