

THE INEVITABLE COINCIDENCE: Looking back the establishment of the first “comfort women” memorial in the US in Palisades Park, NJ

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In the spring of 2009, only two years after the passage of the United States House Resolution 121 (H.Res. 121, the so-called, the “Comfort Women Resolution”), people in the U.S. started to forget about the Comfort Women. During the two years, Japan kept denying its responsibility for the Comfort Women. The activists in the U.S. were desperate to keep the issue alive and bring the justice to the Comfort Women victims.

“Coincidence.” It was a coincidence that one of the staff of the Korean American Civic Empowerment (“KACE,” formerly known as the Korean American Voters’ Council) observed that a group of African Americans were having a ceremony to dedicate a monument to the African American Slavery in front of the Bergen County Court House (“Justice Center”) in Hackensack, NJ, in the late April 2009. After couple of hundred years, the African American community dedicated a small monument to the victims of the slavery. They said it took over ten years to erect the monument. Around the monument, there were three other monuments, each dedicated to Holocaust, Armenian Genocide, and Irish Great Hunger. We realized that in the United States, by having a monument, the people remember many historic events, war crimes, heroes, and victims that happened not only in the U.S. but also in somewhere in the world. We also realized that the Comfort Women issue is one of the historic atrocities that we must memorize in the same way.

Swiftly, we started to organize the community and launched a campaign for the Comfort Women Memorial. KACE’s high school interns dedicated their summer to develop theories, present the project to local governments, and get petition signatures from people. We could get support from Bergen County and the Borough of Palisades Park, in New Jersey. All local community entities chipped in what they have for the Comfort Women memorial: the land from the Borough of Palisade Park, the boulder from Bergen County, the bronze plaque from the people. On October 23, 2010, the first Comfort Women memorial was dedicated in front of the Palisades Park Public Library.

The Comfort Women memorial is important not only because it is the first Comfort Women memorial outside of Asia, but also because it upgraded the Comfort Women issue to another level of movement.

By having a memorial in a public venue, sponsored by local governments, and erected by people, the Comfort Women issue was officially recognized by the people as one of the crimes against humanity like the Holocaust, Armenian Genocide, Irish Great Hunger, and African American Slavery.

With the memorial, we could educate people and our future generations in the U.S. about the Comfort Women that happened far from the U.S. and long time ago. Whatever the Japanese government argues to evade the responsibility, the memorial tells the real story, and refutes the Japanese government’s wrong arguments.

The memorial reignited and maintained the support for the Comfort Women. After the first memorial in Palisades Park, NJ, many Comfort Women memorials were dedicated throughout

the United States. Recognizing the importance of the Comfort Women issue, the Bergen County dedicated another Comfort Women memorial next to the memorials of the Holocaust, Armenian Genocide, Irish Great Hunger, and African American Slavery in 2013.

“We are afraid of being forgotten and being denied,” said Young Soo Lee and Ok Sun Lee, Comfort Women survivors, when they visited the memorial in 2011. **“What a relief we get from this memorial! This memorial will keep us being remembered and being recognized.”**