

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS KOREANS HOPE TO BRIDGE GAP OF OLD AND NEW

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Body

There was an unusual demonstration in front of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service headquarters in Washington, D.C., last October. Included among the 1,000 demonstrators protesting the strict new immigration laws were several busloads of Korean Americans brought there by the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium. For many of them, it was the first time taking part in any civil protest. And when they toured Congress afterward, it was the first time many had met their elected officials, said Chung-Wha Hong, executive director of the Flushing-based Consortium, which goes by the acronym NAKASEC. "Korean people have taken part in a lot of demonstrations, but mostly as part of a larger group," Hong said. "People still have trouble seeing Korean Americans as a political force in this country." Hong and the NAKASEC hope to change that. The group was formed in 1994 in the wake of the Los Angeles riots two years earlier, when Korean businesses in African-American communities were among those hardest hit. "There was a sense of an urgent need to project a national voice," Hong said. "Korean-Americans found that they did not have the political clout to deal at a national level." With small offices in Los Angeles and Chicago, and the national office in Flushing, NAKASEC hopes to remedy that by rallying Korean American support on three main issues: immigration laws, welfare reform, and the upcoming national census. Leading it will be Hong, a 31-year-old mother, wife, organizer and "one-point-fiver." One-point-fivers is the generational term for Koreans who immigrated to these shores at a young age. First generation immigrants were born and lived in the home country for most of their lives; second generations were born here. Traditionally, first generation immigrants retain many of the ways of the old country; immersed in American culture, second generations often have little knowledge of the old ways. One-point-fivers straddle both worlds. Hong was eleven when her parents, father Keun Soo Hong, a minister, and mother Young Kim, left Seoul for St. Louis, settling in a public housing project for a year. "My father was a minister, but he still had to work in a factory," Hong recalled. "My mother worked two jobs and went to school." Hong graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in English Literature before heading to Washington to work for the Asian-Pacific American Labor Alliance, an arm of the AFL-CIO. She moved to New York in 1995 to take the NAKASEC job. Like most minority groups, Koreans have no end of stereotypes to attack. One television, Hong said, "The only time you see Koreans is as a rude store owner." "We're in a really peculiar position. We're projected as if we are all store owners." NAKASEC hopes to change that by involving more Korean Americans in the political process. The group has launched an initiative for 2000 called The Year of Full Participation that is aimed not only at educating community members in the American political process but also in familiarizing elected officials with the community's needs. "A study estimated that more than 1 million immigrants were kept from voting in the last presidential election for one reason or another," Hong said. "How can you maintain a democracy when less than half of eligible people vote?" The group has also joined with 20 other immigrant groups nationally in a "200,000 in 2000" campaign in which they hope to have 200,000 immigrants pledge to vote in the upcoming national elections. But the largest effort will be the creation and distribution of 50,000 voter guides placed "in every store, restaurant, supermarket and other businesses" frequented by the metro area's estimated 400,000 Koreans that will walk them through the electoral process. Those guides will be distributed later this year, Hong said. '00 RESOLUTIONS There are three major goals the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium will focus on this year, according to Chung-Wha

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Hong.Reform of the "harsh" new immigration laws, which she said work to keep families apart.Full participation by Korean Americans in upcoming national elections.Full participation in the 2000 Census. Hong says studies show Korean Americans were undercounted by almost 2 percent in the last national tally.

Graphic

BILL TURNBULL DAILY NEWS Chung-Wha Hong

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