

A Grandma With a Stethoscope

DR. CHO BYUNG-KUK

She spent about half a century at a clinic attached to Holt Children's Services Inc. as a mother and physician of children waiting to be adopted. At nearly the age of 80, she still holds her stethoscope to the chests of patients—orphaned and disabled—to hear their lungs and hearts. She tells us hopeful stories of one of the lowliest places in the world. *by Lee Jeong-eun / photographs by Moon Duk-gwan*

“Good morning, Doctor!”

“Hi, Matae. Are you sick?”

“I have a cold. No temperature, just a runny nose. I'm wearing five layers, but caught a cold anyway.”

“Oh, you're wearing too many clothes. Look at this sweat. If you wear too much, you are actually more likely to catch a cold. Driving the garbage truck early in the morning must be hard.”

Matae (a Korean transliteration of Matthew) frequents the clinic office of Dr. Cho Byung-kuk. He has a mental disability. Like a small child who looks around for his mom as soon as he wakes up in the morning, Matae comes to her office at the slightest cough or scratch. It is his very heart that he wants to have cured.

At a clinic attached to Holt Children's Services, Cho spent about 50 years as a mother and physician of children who were waiting to be adopted. Today, she works for persons who were not adopted because of their disabilities. Next year, she turns 80, but she cannot leave Holt.

“I joined the clinic in 1974 and retired in 1993,” says Cho. “Because of the low pay, nobody wanted to fill the vacancy. So, I worked there for another 15 years with the title, ‘former director.’ One day, I had to put down my

stethoscope for a while due to serious shoulder pains. Some time later, I received a call from the Holt Ilsan Center. They asked me to take care of disabled children just for four months. That was already three years ago.”

The Holt Ilsan Center opened in 1961 for children who are both disabled and orphaned. Their disabilities prevented them from being adopted. The center is home to 270 persons with disabilities including some who came here when the center opened. Matae is one of them.

The residents not only receive training and treatment, but learn how to live as independent human beings. Matae's disability is not too serious, so he works at the center to support his wife and children.

MOTHER OF 60,000 ADOPTEES

Cho's reasons for becoming a medical doctor are painful. After losing two younger siblings to disease and then seeing people injured and dying during the Korean War, she decided to become a life-restoring doctor. She graduated from Yonsei University School of Medicine and did her internship at Seoul City Dongbu Children's Hospital, where she also served as a resident. Before she joined Holt Children's Services years later, she volunteered there.

“In the 1960s, Korea was an extremely





Dr. Cho Byung-kuk will turn 80 next year, but she still treats the disabled to this day.

poor country,” recalls Cho. “Children were abandoned at the door of the hospital, and a quarter of them died because of malnutrition and inadequate medical treatment. More than 2,000 children were left at the hospital every year, and about 500 of these died soon afterwards. Whenever I saw a child whose life helplessly flickered away, I hated myself for not being able to do anything but watch. Whenever I had to write a death certificate, I asked myself accusingly, ‘Am I a doctor, who is supposed to heal people?’”

Back then, social interest in and the government’s support for such children were an impossible luxury. Children raised at institutions or hospitals were more likely to be sick and grow slowly even if they were fed adequately. However, once they were adopted and had a family, they became chubby and full of vitality. Cho concluded that it was love, not

rice, that helped the children grow and that sending them abroad as adoptees was the only viable way to keep them alive and give them opportunities to pursue happiness. She resigned from the hospital where she had worked for 14 years, and moved to a clinic attached to Holt Children’s Services.

At the new workplace, she rolled up her sleeves to find new parents for children who were without families. When their faces regained their long-lost smiles upon meeting their new parents, her heart was overwhelmed. That joy kept her at Holt Children’s Services for half a century.

Of course, for all those many years, there were frustrations, too. The international community attached the stigma of “exporter of orphans” to Korea, so the government completely banned the sending of children abroad as adoptees. Although the ban was

soon lifted, she had already suffered great frustration, asking herself, “Was what I did merely to export orphans?” She had only hoped to find new parents for sick and abandoned children to help them grow in loving homes, but there were few in Korea who were willing and qualified to adopt such children. That’s why she turned her eyes toward willing and qualified families in other countries. She nearly resigned out of distress but the thought of the children who would be deserted once again drove her to carry on.

LOVE CHANGES

More than 60,000 adoptees were under the care of Cho at one time or another. When doing the paperwork for those children, she always wrote, “discovered in/at _____” rather than “abandoned in/at _____.”

“Well, I got the idea from Americans,” says Cho. “When an adoptee has a chance to see their adoption document as a grownup, they feel hurt deep down if they see the word, ‘abandoned.’ Children abandoned are sad, but children discovered are hopeful. So, ever since 1980, I always wrote, ‘discovered.’”

Cho has many well-thumbed photo albums sent by the adoptive parents, showing that those small, sick children had become all smiles and healthy. Seeing them is heartwarming, bringing tears to her eyes from time to time.

“There was a child who lost her legs,” says Cho in reminiscence, “because her mom had jumped before a running train with the child in her arms. Thankfully, she was adopted by an American family. Some years later, her parents sent me photos of her climbing a jungle gym, and another some years later of her skating! Who would have known such a miracle could happen? I was so thankful to the world that my eyes were brimming with tears.”

These days, she lives at the Holt Ilsan Center in order to take better care of those 270 persons with disabilities—children and grownups—whom nobody was willing to adopt.

“An adoptee wrote, ‘Now is the time to stop working for a moment and say ‘thank you,’ in

a letter,” says Cho. “I feel the same way right now. If I could, I would like to make a deep bow to all those nurses and volunteers who have helped me with this mission in many ways. As long as my health allows, I want to meet the children who were at Holt while taking care of the residents here.”

That is why this old physician—Dr. Cho Byung-kuk—takes up her stethoscope again today.

About Dr. Cho Byung-kuk

- Medical Director, Holt Ilsan Center
- Yonsei University Medical School, Bachelor of Medicine
- Order of Civil Merit, Camellia Medal on the 7th Adoption Day, 2012
- 26th Boryeong Medical Award, 2010
- Medical Director, Holt International Children’s Services Medical Clinic (1963-2008)
- Medical Director, Holt Ilsan Center Medical Center (2008-present)

