Voices from the Silence: Defectors from North Korea Share their Stories

David Caprara

To most, the idea of meeting and speaking with North Koreans and discussing their stories and the political situation of their isolated “hermit kingdom” seems like little more than a farfetched daydream. An impossible experience from a country that is likened to a black hole where not even light can escape. Yet, in the months of November and December of 2014, I had the opportunity to have such an experience.

Working through the Seoul-based Global Peace Foundation, I was given the rare opportunity to conduct private interviews with North Korean defectors who had fled their homeland and began new lives in the South. These individuals represented a wide range of ages and backgrounds, and each conveyed a profound story of endurance. The overwhelming majority possessed a hope for the future and a strong belief that reunification of the Korean peninsula is possible—if the people of Korea are willing to take on that challenge.

The following are several interviews selected from that series. I believe that the diversity of these particular interviews selected will inform the reader of the diversity of views held by North Koreans, as well as a common set of similarities.

For the protection of the individuals interviewed, no photographs are presented. Names have been falsified, but the ages and regions where the individuals were living in North Korea remain accurate. This interview was conducted with the aid of an interpreter so the subjects’ replies are not verbatim quotes.
but rather, are interpretations of what they said. Instances where the interviewee was spoken of in the third-person by the interpreter have been changed to the first-person to preserve a fluid sense of dialogue between the interview and interviewee. Words written in italics are commentary from the writer.

**Interview I: The Discontent and Hopes of a Former Government Official**

The first person interviewed was a man of 50, Mr. Jeon Joo Myung. He arrived in Seoul in 2004. Mr. Myung had an air of dignity and confidence and spoke with great energy and enthusiasm. He in particular, the interpreter later commented, had a distinct northern accent and used a great deal of words that were no longer (or in some cases never were) a part of the South Korean vocabulary.

**Q: Could you share a bit about your life in North Korea before you left?**

I used to work as a government officer in a local provincial center in Gang Won Do Province. I served in the military for nine years, which is usually ten years, but was allowed to leave early to study at the university. I went on to study Industrial Engineering for five years and then pursued work as a government official for my province. I am unable to share with you the exact details of what my work entailed, but it entailed supervising work being done in a small region within the province.

**Q: What made you discontent with your life there? How did you decide to leave?**

In North Korea, everything is controlled by the centralized government and only those with high positions live well. There is a sentiment that lives in the hearts of North Koreans and that is: “to live well by yourself and by overcoming hardships and poverty.” Kim Il Sung is seen as the ideal model for this enduring spirit. Many stories of him are taught in grade schools of him having spent periods of his life in very trying conditions.

The North Korean people are strong and have become quite good at enduring hardships. Yet, it is only so long before people begin to ask: ‘Just how long must we endure before things get better?’ Some people are beginning to question whether or not they ever will.

Some co-workers and I used to discuss such things in private amongst one another. We asked ourselves how we could bring about change. One of the individuals that I met with was a friend who did work in a division specializing in hacking and cyber warfare defense systems. He would later leave his job and flee to Seoul. Eventually, I would follow his lead.

The reason why I decided to leave was that I realized the model of ‘living on our own and enduring’ is not a practical model and that it will go on forever. It is better for us [North and South Koreans] to live together.

**Q: How is it possible that so many people are able to live under a nation like North Korea? Is it that the citizens are so sheltered that they don’t know what other kind of life they could be living, or is it perhaps that the people of your country actually believe from the bottom of their hearts that the system that they are working with is a force of righteousness?**
The two go hand in hand. There are many people who do believe that they are working for the best cause on the face of the earth. But the reason that they come to believe such things is because they have not been exposed to anything else. The brainwashing in North Korea is powerful. But brainwashing is not a process of sitting people in front of TV’s showing propaganda and hypnotizing them; rather, it is a process of confining their views so that the inevitable conclusions that they themselves draw on life are precisely what you would like them to be. They don’t feed you beliefs, they feed you conditions—conditions which 99% of the time will lead you to come to believe what they want you to believe.

Q: Can you share with us how you managed to make it out of the country?

There are elaborate escape programs set up through Chinese brokers. This takes time-- in my case, two years. You can never really trust the broker that you are working with. In many cases individuals spend their life savings to make it across the border, only to find that they were set up. Just as some Chinese make a profit from sending individuals out of the country, there are others who make their livings delivering refugees back to the North Korean government.

I mentioned before that I had a friend who had escaped. Actually, at the time he just disappeared, and after he left we never heard any details of what had happened with him. Two years passed and then one day out of the blue, I received a phone call from him. There are secret Chinese services that allow phone conversations between people in North Korea and family and friends who have made it to the outside. He wanted to meet me at a town bordering the DMZ. I was excited to meet him again, but had no idea that during our meeting he would try to persuade me to join him in the South.

I followed his directions to the border where I paid a bribe to a soldier that he knew and entered a taxi that was waiting for me with several other individuals. I asked them many times where we were going, but nobody seemed to speak Korean. They were all speaking Chinese.

I saw my friend and he told me his plan. I told him that he was crazy. I had never thought about leaving North Korea. I told him it was dangerous, both for me and my family, but he assured me that he could provide protection both for me and my family. After our meeting, he had persuaded me. I went home, and shortly after my family and I fled to South Korea.

We made it to Seoul and established a life there, but in 2006 something happened with my family. They were caught and sent back to the North. Leaving North Korea is a sin in the government’s eyes. They were taken back to our province in the North.

I later contacted my wife and told her that I had a way for her to come back, but she was afraid. It was revealed to me then that she and my children had suffered greatly under the hands of the government for having fled. My wife did not want for her and the children to have to ever experience anything like that again.

I have not seen my family since that incident. There are brokers on this side that enable me to wire them money untraced through Chinese bank accounts and to send them updates from time to time, however, it is uncertain as to whether or not I will ever see them again.

Q: Do you think reunification will ever occur?
People’s minds need to change in order for this to happen. We need exchanges, and seeds of hope must be planted within individuals’ hearts. This is difficult to do. In North Korea, one is not even allowed to say the word “reunification.”

One thing that is often talked about in the dialogue is the idea of opening the gates and bringing the North up to the South’s standards. Most people imagine that this will have to happen in the North’s most desolate moment of hopelessness and poverty. But things will not happen this way. When there is poverty, North Korea only becomes more closed off and the authorities more controlling. And why would the South ever want to unify with a nation that has hit the lowest economic state possible? This would feel like a burden to the South, and from the North’s perspective being lifted up from this low position of defeat would be humiliating.

Instead of unifying when the poles of disparity and wealth of North and South are at their greatest extremes, we have to strive towards arriving at a similar ground, not only economically, but also in terms of our hopes and dreams for a unified Korea.

Reunification must be dignified, and benefits must be seen from both sides. Yes, there is a great deal of work on infrastructure that will need to be done in North Korea, but we should not allow these figures to make us short-sighted. Now that tensions with neighbors in this region have simmered down, a united Korea run under a free-market economy would benefit greatly from having land borders with Russia and China. North Korea has many natural resources, and under the right system our new Korea could utilize all of these factors to build a Korea that is stronger than the two could ever be on their own.

More important than economy, however, is our 5,000 years of shared history. Our differences are but a small speck in time when looked at from this perspective.

This desire for dignity seemed to be a theme expressed by many of the individuals interviewed. Just as individuals find it difficult to admit that they had been wrong and an enemy had been in the right, nations appear to react in the same way. The sentiment that both nations need to humble themselves if reunification is to occur seemed to be a common theme among all respondents. It seems that many people on the outside expect all of the burden of change to rest with the people of North Korea, but the dialogue must work both ways.

**Interview II: A Former Athlete and Employee of Agriculture**

*Miss Hyang Mi Kim, 40, arrived in Seoul in 2006. She has no children and fled on her own.*

**Q:** Can you share with us a bit about your story prior to leaving North Korea?

When I was young, I was a professional athlete in the traditional sport of Jeon Goo, which is similar in some ways to tennis. I was an athlete until the age of 21, when the sport was removed because of its decline of popularity.

I went on to attain a job that dealt with the control and distribution of rice. It was a rare and important job, not easy to attain. Such work was something to be proud of, as the food and crop sector is the most important sector in North Korea.
In North Korea food is collected and distributed by the state. Because supply is limited, rice is our most precious resource. This forces us to be strict. It was my job to guard the rice that was stored in warehouses prior to distribution. I was given a machine gun and made sure that nobody stole from the warehouse.

People would try to come in and hide just a handful or two in their coat pockets. Some were very hungry. If people were caught stealing, it meant 2 to 3 days of forced labor.

Q: What was the state of poverty where you were living?

The state of poverty varies from house to house. Each house has a food distribution card, and how much rice a family gets is dependent upon how many people are living in their household. Poverty is determined by distribution, and not one’s individual circumstances.

When Kim Il Sung died, there were very bad conditions for three years. My neighbors and I sometimes could not eat food for days at a time. In such situations, those who want to survive sometimes have to ask their neighbors for food, and this is humiliating. The other option is to look for plants to eat in the mountains. During this time I witnessed the slow process of one of my closest friends succumb to starvation and death.

In North Korea individuals work hard, but are unable to get the value that they truly worked for.

Q: Can you share with us how you left the country, and what made you decide to leave?

I wanted to have more freedom. My younger sister left three years before me. I was able to communicate with her through a Chinese broker at the border. The details of my escape are actually typical of most North Koreans who flee the country.

There are usually two brokers, one on each side of the border, that enable this to happen. But the brokers are always changing, and you never feel like you can trust them for certain. Everything is conducted through the Chinese. Without them, escape is impossible.

The first step is to call your contact in the South, and once you receive an OK, you proceed through a border region in China. You are traveling with a group of five to six people that you do not know, and have no certainty that you are able to trust them. If one of you is caught, you are all caught. After arriving in China, this group poses as a tour group, sometimes traveling to other countries to better hide their trail before eventually making in to Thailand, where they can go to a refugee center and apply for refugee status with the South Korean government. Thailand and South Korea have an agreement that protects us and allows this to happen.

Q: When in North Korea, did you know what sort of South Korea you would be fleeing to? Do North Koreans have any idea what life is like outside of their country?

When answering this question Miss Kim automatically dropped her voice down to almost a whisper. There was no one in the room that posed any sort of danger to her, but after living for years having to hide such information from others, the feeling of openly sharing such things with others clearly went against the instincts that she had developed throughout her life in North Korea.
For most, television is the only way of seeing the outside world. Of course, everything shown on normal television is controlled by the government. There is only one channel, and most of the time the only thing that it shows is the news of North Korea.

But the Chinese have established a black market in the country, and it is very easy for individuals to get ahold of movies and television dramas from South Korea. I’m sure that many people that I knew owned such things. But watching television shows from South Korea is dangerous—one has to close all of their curtains and keep the volume low so that people outside cannot see what you are doing. If you are caught you must pay a very large fine. In very rare cases individuals are sent to live in different provinces.

What drew me in to these movies and TV dramas was not the plot or the direct content of the shows, but the world in which these films were set: the cars, the buildings, the restaurants; the daily lives of the people. It was so different to the life that I was living.

Q: What was your first shock or impression of Seoul when you arrived?

All of the lights and how it is always bright in Seoul. In North Korea, there are always blackouts. There are popular satellite images that show the difference between North and South Korea at night. The North seems like a dark cave. What these images reflect are controlled power blackouts that are conducted to save energy, and in some areas they occur every night. People in Seoul do not have to experience this.

Q: What are your thoughts on Korean unification?

This is the biggest assignment for the Korean peninsula. As North Korea becomes weaker, I begin to worry about the influences other surrounding countries might have there. I want to believe that it can happen and that the time is ripe for change, but three generations ago my grandmother swore to my mother when she was a little girl that she would see reunification within her lifetime. When I was a child, my mother told the same thing to me. Now if I were to have children, could I tell them this, or would this just be a lie?

Interview III: Teen Spirit; an Interview with a High School Student

This interview was conducted on the day of the year’s first snowfall. The individual interviewed was a 19-year-old high-school student who went by the name of Hwan Hee Kim. She had fled the North with her mother when she was a junior high school student and arrived in South Korea in 2008. She had a very strong personality, blunt and sometimes curt with her words, making no attempt to appease anyone in the room and simply speaking whatever she felt. And yet she had a fragility to her character, a certain lightness that contrasted with her roughness like a small beautiful flower shaking alone on the top of a cold rocky mountain in the depths of winter. She was obviously very emotionally affected by her experiences—her eyes were glossy throughout the interview, her face sometimes showed small twitches and her statements were broken by periods of crying from time to time. And yet her laughter had a
refreshing strength to it that would cut through you and make you question whether or not you had ever truly experienced anything in life.

Q: Could you share a bit about your life before you left for South Korea? How and why did you leave?

My best memories are mostly of simple things like hanging out with friends.

My grandma came before the rest of us. She was living south of Seoul and wired us money through Chinese brokers. The government cannot track where the money is coming from when it is transferred, but they were suspicious so our family was heavily watched over. My mother wanted to flee anyway though. My father had fallen ill and we thought we would take him to South Korea to get better treatment.

My mom, my sister, and I made our escape first. We crossed the Tumen River, walked through China and got on a bus that took as south. Something went wrong in my father’s escape, however. He took a different route and was captured in Mongolia.

For North Koreans, if we are captured in China the punishment is not as severe as it is if one is discovered in Mongolia. If a North Korean is seen in China, it is possible that they are just trying to find a job. If one makes it as far as Mongolia, however, it is quite obvious that they are trying to escape. I have not heard from my father since we left and I do not know how he is doing.

Q: What were your first impressions of South Korea?

We began living in an unfurnished 7th floor apartment on the outskirts of Seoul. It was very vacant there and there weren’t any people outside of the building either. I asked myself: ‘Am I really living where other human beings live?’ I felt scared. I missed the friends from my old life.

Q: How bad was the poverty in your country?

The only thing the news and TV programs in Seoul ever talk about regarding North Korea is poverty and suffering, but the reality is that, despite our hardships, the children are having a good time hanging out and being friends. It shows that we value human relationships above material commodities.

I don’t want people to think life in North Korea is 100% negative because it isn’t. All people ever ask me is how bad the poverty was; they don’t care or want to even believe that there could be good sides of life there. If we leave the North and come to Seoul, we eventually get trained to start thinking of ourselves as disabled victims. People always talk about North Korean brainwashing but this is a sort of brainwashing too when it starts to change the way you think about yourself.

After coming here I read the autobiography of Hellen Keller. Her story gave me a sense of encouragement for my own life and allowed me to stop seeing myself as having a disability like everyone around me wanted me to believe.

Q: Do your friends know that you are from North Korea?

Only my closest friends. I had classmate once who bullied me frequently. He would always ask me ‘Are you hungry?’ He irritated me so much and his words hurt me inside, but I would never respond to him. I would just look him in the eyes and remain silent.

Q: Do you think unification will ever happen?
North and South Korea have developed very different ideas of what happiness is. In the South, happiness is to have money and to be handsome or pretty. North Korea is different. We grew up in a different background. That is why North Korea avoids communication with other countries.

One difference that surprised me when I came here was how competitive everyone is. I could not understand it. But after time, I began to understand why students cry when they get wrong answers on tests.

South Korea believes that after reunification we need to build more buildings and bridges and build a capitalistic system to basically photocopy South Korea onto North Korea. But this isn’t unification, it’s the South taking over. No one thinks to ask whether or not people in North Korea actually want these things.

The world needs to change its view that South Korea needs to “bring the North up.” We should be bringing each other up. Unification has to be seen as a win/win on both sides, not just beneficial for North Korea alone.

*After the interview, the interpreters and I took Hwan Hi out for an informal lunch at a local barbeque restaurant. We were able to talk about a range of subjects and she was able to put me under the spotlight and ask me questions about myself and my country. She said quite frankly that before she had not really cared so much for Americans, and that she had read a book once that went through history and pointed out that the majority of our world’s major political crises bare fingerprints of the United States.

At one point she asked me, “What do you think beauty is?”

I thought for too long and what I responded with was a fumbling of words that didn’t have much weight. Then I turned the question to her: “What do you think?”

She took a brief moment and gave a reply that obviously did not come from a textbook, but from her own heart and experience:

“Beauty can only come after suffering. You need to be hurt and bear scars before you can ever truly experience the beauty of a flower.”

**Interview IV: Interview with a Philosophy Student at Sogang University**

*Choi Jang Hyun came to South Korea in 2008. His origins are in Ham Kyeong Buk Do province in North Korea.*

Q: **What were you doing in North Korea before you left?**

I was a University student at Cheong Jin University and had completed three years of study towards my degree. I was a major in Korean Studies.

My mother was a high school teacher, and as a child I loved reading books. I hated kindergarten and used to join her in her classes. I would go to the high school library often as a child and further developed my love for reading. When I got older I wanted to read more, but there isn’t a good selection
of books available in North Korea and it is almost impossible to find books that are written in other countries.

One day my father went to China and came back with a book on philosophy. This book motivated me to want to study more.

Q: What is university life like in North Korea?

Education is competitive, and most of what is taught is information that is to be memorized rather than debated and defended. This is actually pretty characteristic of university life in South Korea as well. [Both he and the interpreter laugh]

In Seoul, after classes most students have free time that they can spend either studying on their own or in taking up a part time job. In North Korea, however, students have to help their professor harvest crops at a farm owned and run by the university. This takes up a lot of time.

Homework assignments don’t differ so much from what you see in South Korea, though the quality of the paper there is very bad.

In the university libraries, it is very difficult to find good books. Students aren’t actually allowed to enter the area where the bookshelves are and select books on their own; everything has to be done through the librarian. You say “I want X type of book” and then they bring something to the desk for you. The selection is very limited.

Q: How many books do you think were in your University Library?

I don’t think the librarian even knows the answer to that question.

Q: How do the philosophy books in North Korea differ from what one would find in South Korea?

In North Korea we have philosophy books, but they only focus on the biographies of the philosophers, and not actually what sorts of things they thought. They don’t contain anything that makes one question life or the societal system that they are living under. They do not make one think or doubt. Anything bordering on the realm of real philosophy only deals with the ideals of the party and the Kim leaders.

Q: After leaving the country and being exposed to an academic environment where you are able to think about life and the society that you live in, how have your views of North Korea changed?

In the North, truth is absolute. But in philosophy and in life, truth is endless, everywhere, and we have to study it again and again throughout our lives because it is always changing. In North Korea one view is right and all opposing views are wrong. You are not able to respect what other people think about subjects. Since moving to South Korea, I’ve learned to respect differing views, even if I don’t agree with them, because truths are arrived at through experience and no two peoples’ experiences are the same.

As an example of this, I had one friend who suffered a lot in North Korea and was sent to prison and tortured on several occasions. This friend was under the belief that Korean unification was the answer to our problems, but that the only way that this could ever be attained would be for South Korea to invade North Korea militarily and crush the dictatorship of the Kims through force.
I myself did not suffer so much in North Korea and had a very different experience. I also believe that
unification is the answer, but that this sort of peace should be a process that evolves gradually through
dialogue and exchange. Our approaches are different, but I understand that this is because of our
histories. If I had suffered a life of oppression similar to my friend, I too would have probably adopted a
more hardline set of beliefs and solutions to our problems.

Q: Do North Koreans actually believe the propaganda that they hear?

In public and on television people are loyal, but in their private lives most people do not care or have
time for these things. We don’t bow to pictures of Kim Il Sung in our homes or put flowers in front of his
picture. The common people are more concerned with working and trying to survive.

Loyalty to the government is not the most important thing when you are trying to survive. The loyalty
that one observes on the news is just a survival technique.

Q: What sort of changes need to take place within the minds of North Koreans in order for there to be
unification?

Rather than focusing on changing the lower class, the elites need to be changed. The lower class does
not have time to think about revolution; they are just trying to survive. The people that need to be
targeted are elite leaders, university students, and professors. Slowly we need to change the way that
they think about North Korea.

Q: If Korea is unified, what sort of challenges will have to be faced?

People in South Korea are very materialistic and people here are judged based on their appearance and
the things that they have purchased. This vanity will cause those in the North to be judged by those in
the South and will make people in the North feel embarrassed that they do not live under the same
standards. Socially, this will be one of the biggest difficulties.

Hyun is working actively in Seoul to promote ideas of unification among the South Korean youth, who are
often criticized by the older generation for being apathetic towards this issue. He is a public speaker and
organizer for the Peace Education Project (Pyeong Hwa Gyo Yuk), supported by the Woo Yang
Foundation, an organization that hosts talks between North Korean defectors and middle-school and
high-school students in the Seoul metropolitan area.

Interview V: “The Artist.”

The subject requested that for this interview not even a faux nom be used for her identity. She is a 35-
class woman who lived in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang and came to Seoul in 2004.

The interview and the tone in which it conducted felt categorically different from the rest of the
interviews. Ten years had passed since she fled her country and this was the first time she had ever
agreed to an interview to share her story publicly. She was very sensitive and almost any question that
was posed might have potentially caused her to become hurt and become silent.

It became clear early on that this interview would have to be conducted differently from the others. The
questions could not be blunt and overly-direct. This interview would have to be more a process of
listening and allowing the interviewee herself to open up and share what she felt she could. Difficult
questions could be approached gradually after spending time talking about more mundane topics. Some of the lesser conversations that preceded more substantial statements do not appear in what follows.

She said that she had attended conferences where other defectors had spoken, in hopes that she could gain the confidence to tell her story. Perhaps through this first attempt at an interview, she will be able to develop a confidence that will one day flourish so that the world can benefit from learning of her experiences and hopes for the Korean peninsula.

Prior to leaving North Korea, she had trained for and participated in the Pyongyang Arirang Festival. This festival, also sometimes referred to in English as the “North Korean Mass Games,” is the greatest show of North Korean unity and devotion. It is one of the country’s only efforts to expose itself culturally to other countries.

Q: Can you share a bit about the Arirang Festival?

Though the festival has a long history, we began doing these performances to show the rest of the world in 2001. I participated in the year 2002. Participants range from age six to university students and are allowed to perform one to five times in their lives. The festival is an expression of our unity and an example of how the state can bring millions of people to all move as one. You cannot understand this unity unless you are born there, but to North Koreans, even the love and devotion that one has towards one’s own father and mother is not as powerful as the devotion is to our leader. In North Korea, we are told that since Russian socialism collapsed we are the only ones left and that we have to preserve ourselves from foreign influence to stay true to our values. The content of the performances are historical in nature and the games are performed to please our leader and to show the world a display of our might.

What was your role in the Arirang Festival?

She seemed angered at this question and my thinking. Her quiet reply, devoid of details:

I was a part of 50 thousand people.

Later, however, it was eventually revealed that she played the role of a dancer.

What was practice like?

We practice all year round, even in winter, no matter what the weather. Gymnasts performed acrobatics without practice mats, and no one was even given meals to eat—we had to pack our own from home. The performances are practiced with a perfectionism that allows no mistakes. If someone makes a mistake during practice, nobody goes home until they are able to do it right.

Do you think other countries could accomplish such a performance?

No. There is no other country in the world today where all of the people are united under a single cause like this. If North and South Korea should ever unify, I do not believe that such performances would be possible anymore. This sort of unity would dissipate.

What was your job outside of performing in the Arirang Festival?

At this question, she grew very silent and replied with what her occupation was with a single word. The silence grew deeper after her reply and those present were taken by a sense of awkwardness that could
not be helped upon hearing her occupation--further widening the wound that had been revealed. It was clear that she did not want to share about her work experience and later, in addition to requesting that we not even make a faux nom for her, she requested that we not share what her occupation was. Aside from the obvious danger she could be put in by revealing her work, one was given the impression that she also felt a sense of shame about leaving. She had given the first 25 years of her life with utmost devotion to her country and the idea of having defected, even if for a better life, still seemed to evoke a sense of disloyalty.

After trying to continue with lighter topics, we decided to change our interview location. This, combined with a short break that she took alone outside of our next interview location, proved to lighten the air of our interview.

Q: Why is it that under a system of state-controlled distribution North Korea has plummeted to such a state of poverty? Why is it that everyone is equal in suffering, and not instead in wealth and prosperity?

There are many reasons and this issue is complicated. One reason though is that there is not truly equal distribution. In the past, equal distribution existed, but now it is different. There are many markets and only people with money are able to set up businesses to make more money. The gap between the rich and poor is enormous.

Above this though is the fact that North Korea simply lacks the resources to survive completely on its own. Lack of human resources, natural resources, mental resources—in all types of resources we are lacking. Even if people have ideas for how to better develop the country, there is no freedom for them to share their ideas.

Q: Why did you leave?

My coming to South Korea was actually unintentional. I had visited China to meet friends, but I soon put myself in a very complicated situation where I had no choice but to leave North Korea. Although my first experiences of South Korea were of isolation and fear, I do not regret leaving.

I did not suffer a lot or have a difficult time like other people in my country. I arrived in Seoul safely and conveniently with the help of the South Korean government. This is one of the reasons why I feel that other people who fled North Korea have a stronger voice than my own. They suffered more than me.

What do you think can be done to build a better future for the people of North Korea? Do you think there should be unification?

When many people talk about unification they only talk about the South taking over the North economically. If this is the route that is taken there will be many side-effects.

We need to gradually build more exchange, and in order to do this North Korea needs to be lifted out of poverty and oppression. North Korea needs to bring itself up economically. We also need to build more factories like those found in the KaeSong Industrial Region where people from both the North and South can work side by side. We need more exchange.
The common people of North Korea need to be allowed to learn about the outside world. They know absolutely nothing. It is important to expose the common people to the world so that they know what is going on. Right now they are in the dark and this is not the way to build a positive country.

**Through sharing your own story, what do you want people to understand about North Korea?**

I want them firstly to learn that, even within North Korea, people do not have an understanding of how others are living in social classes outside of their own. More than anything, I want them to understand the real story of North Korea, and that is the story of its people.

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*David Caprara is a journalist currently based in Seoul, Korea. You can visit his blog at [www.itemiyo.com](http://www.itemiyo.com)*