



MGM MELTING POT / by MINNIE LAMBERTH

The arrival of Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama and its multiple suppliers provided an enormous boost to the River Region's (and beyond) business community. But it's affected more than the local economy; the area's automotive industry has also spurred sharing of cultures.



In multiple ways, Koreans are plugging into the Montgomery community. IMAGES COURTESY OF A-KEEP.

In recent years, the Korean population in the Montgomery area has grown significantly, thanks primarily to Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama and Korean-based supplier manufacturing companies that are located in this part of the state.

At the same time, other retail and professional businesses have opened to serve families in the Korean community. As a result, the automotive industry is not only making a nearly \$5 billion a year economic impact on the state – half of which is in Montgomery County – it has also created a growing cultural influence.

Today, 70 Korean-owned businesses are operating in the greater Montgomery area. This number includes more than a dozen restaurants, along with beauty supply stores,

hair salons and martial arts studios. There is a Korean-owned grocery store and gas station, as well as a catering company. More Korean-owned professional services include real estate offices and medical clinics, as well as a law office, accounting firm and computer network office. The community has also seen the opening of more than a dozen Korean churches, and Koreans are attending American churches as well. Nichelle Nix, director of the Governor's Office of Minority Affairs, welcomes this addition to our cultural mix. "The more diversity, the more colorful," Nix said. "It's adding beauty to a palette. We have so much to learn from each other."

Nix's office was designated as a cabinet-level position in 2016, and part of her role is cultural awareness. As Nix seeks to build re-

lationships with diverse communities to find out needs and bridge gaps, she noted that the Alabama-Korea Education and Economic Partnership, or A-KEEP, is an important resource for her office.

Meesoon Han, Executive Director of A-KEEP, said that her organization is "connecting local Alabamians to Koreans and Koreans to Alabamians." They are here to assist American businesses who want to do business with Koreans and Koreans who need services from Americans. "We are information providers," Han said.

As she noted that Korean retail business has grown tremendously in the eastern part of Montgomery, she also pointed out that local businesses have added bilingual staff. "American banks, insurance companies,



A-KEEP offers after-school and summer KSL programs for youth . IMAGES COURTESY OF A-KEEP.

their body languages,” she said. “When you are dealing with two different cultures, when they have totally different backgrounds, it is much more cautious to approach how we communicate.”

A-KEEP also offers after-school and summer KSL programs for youth. Being able to learn a foreign language is a critical piece in brain growth, according to Dr. Charles Ledbetter, superintendent of Pike Road Schools and A-KEEP board member. “The part of the brain you use for language is the same part of the brain you use for mathematics and computation,” Ledbetter said. In addition to the intellectual benefit, he said, “It helps students to learn, understand and value different cultures and ideas from around the world.”

The summer KSL session will be held this year at Pike Road Schools and is open to any youth. As students participate in programs like this, Ledbetter said that they find, “We’re really not that different. We really have a lot in common.”

large retail stores and medical professionals, for example, are increasing bilingual services for Koreans. Korean bilingual education is the biggest topic for us,” Han said.

beginner Korean speakers to build a solid foundation of the Korean language.

A-KEEP has recently begun a Community KSL (Korean as a Second Language) Class, providing help for non-Korean speakers and

Cultural exchanges are more than restaurants and retail, Han pointed out, but also about issues of daily living. “They want to know more about Koreans and how they can connect or communicate or how to read

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