

# Reporter K.W. Lee Dead at 96

Investigative journalist helped free death-row inmate, forge pan-Asian coalition.

By George Toshio Johnston,  
Senior Editor

Subject of imperial Japan. Teen soldier. Immigrant. Outcast. Pioneer. Entrepreneur. Mentor. And, of course, journalist. The many lives of Kyung Won Lee all came to an end March 8 in Sacramento, Calif. He was 96.

Of his many lives, each of which could be the subject of a book or movie, it was the award-winning and impactful investigative journalism career of K. W. Lee, as he was known to most, for which he will be remembered and studied.

In fact, two movies inspired by Lee's journalism were made: the whitewashed Hollywood version, 1989's "True Believer," and the Emmy-award winning documentary from 2022, "Free Chol Soo Lee" (see March 18, 2022, *Pacific Citizen*, [tinyurl.com/mpa5mzc7](http://tinyurl.com/mpa5mzc7)).

Both were inspired by K. W. Lee's reporting on a fellow Korean immigrant with the same last name on death row for a brazen murder that he not only did not commit, it was a slaying for which he had absolutely no involvement.

That man's name was Chol Soo Lee, who was eventually set free thanks to his namesake's dogged investigative reporting.

Though grateful, Chol Soo Lee could not adjust to life on the outside, and he fell into a life of ignominy. By 2014, he was dead at 62, leaving K. W. Lee haunted for the rest of his days.

Kenji Taguma, editor-in-chief of San Francisco-based *Nichi Bei News*, for which Lee contributed a column, told *Pacific Citizen*, "K. W. Lee clearly demonstrated the power of the pen to uncover truth and move people into action. . . . We started a K. W. Lee Reporting Fund to help support community news writing and honor the pioneering legacy of Mr. Lee."



K.W. Lee as a teen soldier in Japan's army air force

PHOTO: K. W. LEE FAMILY

California State University Northridge journalism professor and K. W. Lee Center for Leadership board member Tae Hyun Kim said, "K. W. Lee emphasized the importance of solidarity among diverse minority communities. He believed that the role of journalism was not to separate racial communities but to help them unite and speak with a collective voice."

It was during Japan's colonization of Korea when K. W. Lee was born on June 1, 1928, in Kaesong, in what is now North Korea. In that period, Koreans were forced to take on Japanese names, and during that life, Lee had to use the surname Umeda.

As a 14-year-old during World War II, he served in the Japanese army air force's special volunteer air cadet corps. He endured anti-Korean bullying from some higher-ranking superiors as he learned to become a flight radar operator.

After Japan's defeat, one of his superiors told him that his life would be better if he returned to Korea. He did, later enrolling at Korea University to study English.

Months before the Korean War began in 1950, Lee left Korea for the United States, where he and his small group of fellow Korean students found

themselves stranded once the war was in progress. He earned a B.A. in journalism from West Virginia University and an M.A. in journalism from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Lee realized that returning to Korea, where a professor and he had wanted to start a newspaper "based on the American principles of an independent press," would not be wise — the professor was put to death under Korea's repressive regime. Lee became the target of possible deportation after the Korean embassy began the process of revoking his student visa after he wrote a "sarcastic editorial" about Korean strongman President Syngman Rhee.

Journalism saved him when he landed a job at the *Kingsport Times News* in Tennessee — and yet another life began. Lee became the first Korean immigrant journalist to work for a mainstream U.S. newspaper.

Staying in the American South, by 1958 Lee found himself in West Virginia working for the *Charleston Gazette*, where he went on to cover



Peggy and K. W. Lee

PHOTO: K. W. LEE FAMILY

civil rights and document the impoverished lives of coal miners. He met his future wife, a white emergency room nurse named Peggy N. Flowers, when interracial and intercultural marriages were not just uncommon, they were generally unwelcome.

Hired by the *Sacramento Union*, Lee and family moved across the country in 1970 to California, where his investiga-



K. W. Lee and Ranko Yamada in 2018

PHOTO: GEORGE TOSHIO JOHNSTON

tive journalism turned its focus on backroom deals and corruption in the government and by state legislators.

But it was a 1973 gang-related slaying in miles-away San Francisco, brought to his attention by an organic pan-Asian American coalition led by Ranko Yamada, that would forever change K. W. Lee's life. He would devote countless hours and typewriter ribbons on the Chinatown murder, writing more than 100 articles that helped prove Chol Soo Lee had been the victim of a gross miscarriage of justice. In 1982, he was acquitted and was soon a free man again — with much credit to K. W. Lee.

Another of K. W. Lee's lives began in 1979 when he co-founded, with the help of fellow *Sacramento Union* staffer Steve Chanecka and future *Los Angeles Times* staffer Randy Hagihara, *Koreatown Weekly*, the first English-language newspaper focused on the Korean American community.

Although it would fail after about five years, it did serve as a template of sorts when, a few years later, the *Korea Times* launched its English-language edition for Los Angeles and tapped K. W. Lee to lead it.

But 1990 was a combustible time: Tensions between Korean shopkeepers and residents in Black neighborhoods in South and South Central Los Angeles were rising. Robberies of Korean-run liquor stores and homicides of storeowners became an L.A. news staple.

The slaying of Black teenager Latasha Harlins on March 16, 1991, perceived to be stealing a bottled drink by Korean immigrant shopkeeper Soon Ja Du case was gasoline; the jury found Du guilty of voluntary manslaughter, but the judge in the case gave her probation.

The match that ignited days and nights of rioting came on April 29, 1992 — known to L.A.'s Korean community as

Sa-I-Gu — when a not guilty verdict was announced in the trial of Los Angeles Police Department officers charged in the beating of Rodney King.

Lee, whose position and leadership might have been able to ameliorate some of the worst results of the uprising, could do nothing more than pen a May 11, 1992, editorial titled "Never Again" from a hospital as he awaited a liver transplant.

Laurels that came Lee's way included the Asian American Journalists Assn. presenting him with its "Excellence in Print Journalism" award in 1987 and induction into the now-defunct Newseum.

He also was recognized by National Headliners Club in 1974 and 1983, the AP News Executive Council, the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and the Freedom Forum. His most-meaningful career-related accolades, however, may have been the creation of the K. W. Lee Center for Leadership in 2003 and his participation in the 2022 documentary "Free Chol Soo Lee," which won an Emmy in 2024.

It was Peggy and K. W. Lee's three children of which they were most proud. In a joint statement from Shane Lee, Sonia Cook and Diana Regan, they said, "Our Dad had an innate curiosity about people which showed when he engaged with our friends and others around him. . . . That same curiosity and empathy drove his journalism — he wasn't just searching for facts, but for the human stories behind them."

Kyung Won Lee was predeceased by his wife, Peggy, in 2011. His survivors include son Shane Lee (Sandee), daughters Sonia Cook (Victor) and Diana Regan (Alan); six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. His family asked that anyone wishing to honor him make donations in his name to the K.W. Lee Center for Leadership, at [kwleecenter.org](http://kwleecenter.org). ■

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