

Jin In: Full Herstory

It was the last keynote of the Growing Girls for Greatness Conference. The speaker was reflecting on her life with 36 different foster parents. Even now as an accomplished woman, her only dream is to call someone a "Ma-Ma."

It hit me then—why I was so passionate about my work and why it has become my mission. I have someone to call Ma-Ma. Not only do I have a mother who didn't give me up when things were unbearable for her, but also I have non-biological mothers who have graced my life. I call these ladies angels, as literally they have been angels in my life, guiding, mentoring, and loving me unconditionally. They have instilled strength in me and have taught me to reciprocate this strength. These phenomenal women, including my mother, will never know the profound impact they have had in my life, and my mission is to extend their love to girls around the world. — *Jin In, Founder 4GGL*



The Beginning

I was born in Seoul, Korea to a wealthy family. My economic status changed abruptly, however, after my father passed away when I was just seven months old. He left us too soon, and without a will. Because Korean property laws in those days did not recognize wives as blood relatives, my mother was excluded from the family's multi-million dollar estate.

To make the situation worse, our house was robbed a few months after my father's passing. Everything of value was taken. The burglars knew about the recent passing of my father—and the defenseless wife and two daughters he left behind. They knew it would be easy money.

These tragic events left my mother traumatized and on the brink of a nervous breakdown. Not only was my father her sole financial support, but he was also everything she lived for. She had a college degree but, like most women in her social circle, she'd never felt the need to work. Instead, she had envisioned a life as a good housewife, supporting a successful husband who had aspirations of going into politics.

But life is unpredictable, and we face challenges when we least expect them. When my father passed away, my mother's world turned upside down and she saw very little hope in life. Not only were people

treating her differently, but she knew what my sister and I, as fatherless children in a traditional culture, would face. Other children would tease and treat us cruelly. Therefore she reluctantly decided to move to the United States. Socially, economically, and practically, it was the only option she saw.

Unfortunately there was one caveat to this plan—my sister and I could not go with her. In a foreign country with a language she didn't speak, combined with no job training or experience, she knew it would be difficult to take care of us. Therefore my grandfather offered to raise us in Korea while she worked hard in the U.S., hoping that soon, she could bring us to be with her.

A New Beginning

I remember vividly the day my mother left Korea. I was three years old. After spending the afternoon playing at the zoo, she told my sister and me that she was going on a trip. She promised to return soon with lots of gifts for us. Riding piggyback on my grandmother's back, I waved cheerfully good-bye. I was looking forward to the gifts she would bring back.

My mother's trip lasted almost five years during which I did not know my father had died. My family told me that both, my mother and my father, were in the United States, and that one day soon, my sister and I would join them. I received birthday and holiday gifts addressed from both. I also received phone calls, but of course, my father was conveniently on business trips every time. My whole family played along, and I believed them.

This make-believe world came to an end on December 5, 1980. My sister and I flew to Houston, Texas, where our mother was waiting with open arms. It was then that I learned about the death of my father, but the news didn't surprise me. Having lived almost five years without my parents, I was grateful to be with at least one now. And to be honest, I was more excited about my new life in the United States.

My life only got better. I excelled socially and academically, as angels came into my life to guide me. My third grade teacher helped me come out of my shell by teaching me to be proud of my heritage. In a predominately white school, I was the center of attention on International Day, a day when different ethnicities were celebrated. Also my English as a Second Language teacher gave me special attention. As I quickly learned English, she taught me to help new students. And my fifth grade teacher provided academic encouragement. On graduation day, I received most of the awards. It was then I knew I could do anything and I was my own limitation.





A Woman, a Saint, or Both

The greatest saint of all was Barbara Crocker who I met when I was nine. Many called her "Betty Crocker" for her amazing baking. Barbara not only taught me how to bake, but also showed me a whole new world - not predetermined by gender, but shaped by one's action.

So together, we volunteered at assisted living homes and befriended the old who seemed forgotten. We also worked at the Parkinson's Foundation and other health care facilities specializing in rehabilitation. Through service and community action, I learned the greatest lesson - a poor immigrant girl raised by a widowed mother can make a difference in the world.

Barbara loved everyone—all ethnic, socio-economic, and age groups. And she was not afraid of anyone. In the most impoverished and dangerous neighborhood in Houston, an area many Houstonians avoid, she introduced me to Ms. Lillie Ruth Warren. Ms. Warren was an old African-American woman who had worked for a wealthy white family all her life. She didn't have any children or much family, and because she had suffered a stroke, she couldn't speak or move easily. The neighborhood kids knew about Ms. Warren's condition so they would take advantage of her, using her phone to make long distance calls or stealing her food. So Barbara became Ms. Warren's guardian, looking out for her and advocating for her to anyone who gave Ms. Warren trouble—pharmacists and other health care professionals, looters, and businessmen who were after her property.

Is There Gender Equity – Anywhere?

Unfortunately soon thereafter, Barbara was diagnosed with a disease that no one seemed to be able to help. She had an autoimmune disease called Lupus, and Houston, with the world's largest medical center, could not cure my Barbara.

So I went to medical school to help my Barbara, and the more I learned, the more I wondered if a cure didn't exist because Lupus occurred mainly in women. I became disillusioned with medicine and the health care system, as they seemed to have forgotten women. In fact, it wasn't until 1990 that women and minorities were required to be included in clinical research studies.

Health care isn't the only discrimination women face, and America isn't the only country where this occurs. The sad fact is that worldwide, women and girls are treated as second-class citizens, even today. I've witnessed this stark reality in South Asia, Central America, and the Middle East. Girls and women suffer needless brutalities – extreme poverty, acid attacks, "honor" killing, violent rape, and on and on – just because they are a girl.

Call to ACTION

My mission is to empower girls and women, particularly those who otherwise would never be given the opportunity. This is my mission not because I have to but because I can. I've been given an opportunity because of women like Barbara, Ms. Warren, and my mother. Barbara taught and demonstrated service, particularly for the voiceless. Ms. Warren showed me love and the greatest gift one can give is love. Most importantly, my mother sacrificed her life so that I can become who I am today.

I once heard the most precious things in life are free. Now I know for freedom, you must be willing to let go of material ties. I returned to my birth country, South Korea, as an adult and saw the life I would have had if my father was still alive. It would have been a privileged one with everything money can buy. But that life would not be for me because it would have meant losing my voice.

I also learned that after my father's death, his family had given my mother a choice. Instead of moving to America, they promised her enough money to get by, and in return she would never see my sister and me again. Although this may sound unfathomable, it was the practical solution. Having kids would limit her chances of getting remarried in Korea at the time, and this would also ensure that my sister and I would be well taken care of financially.

But this wasn't what my mother chose. She chose me, and now, I must do the same for millions of girls who are not chosen. I want them to know true empowerment – having a voice and choice.

I imagine a world where every girl recognizes her inner potential to be a powerful force for change. My mission is to inspire future generations of women to have the strength to not only change the world but to change themselves. I hope my story will be a seed, a seed that will plant a life of unimaginable possibilities in their lives. — *Jin In, Founder 4GGL*

