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OCT 16, 2010

@ 12:55 PM

~~[PERMALINK \(HTTP://ONEKOREA.TUMBLR.COM/POST/1328744362/INTERVIEWS-JASON-AHN-DIRECTOR-OF-DIVIDED-FAMILIES\)](http://onekorea.tumblr.com/post/1328744362/interviews-jason-ahn-director-of-divided-families)~~

1 NOTE

### Interviews: Jason Ahn, Director of Divided Families

**“My best friend says, “Jason, I’m not envious of you. You bring it all onto yourself””**

*Jason Ahn*



Grew up in: California

Favorite TV Show/Movie: The Simpsons, Glory

Favorite childhood memory: skateboarding through K-town with his brother

What would you say to Kim, Jung Il if you met him today: “....”

When I first heard about Jason Ahn, I was surprised. Read his profile and you’ll know why: Jason is from California and the Director/Producer of Divided Families (<http://dividedfamilies.com> (~~<http://dividedfamilies.com>~~)), a documentary film that

tells the story of the first generation Korean Americans who were separated from their family during the Korean War. He is also a third year medical student at Harvard Medical School. Last year, he finished a year-long study at Harvard Kennedy School, part of his MD and MPP (Master’s degree in Public Policy) joint degree program.

In fact, here is a snapshot of his life: he stays up all night

waiting for babies to be born for his residency program, comes back home in the morning, catches some sleep, attends a conference, *meets up with a MOU Overseas Student Correspondent for a quick interview about his film*, before he runs back to the hospital where more babies are born, with barely a time to grab his dinner. Plus, he has to finish editing the documentary film, which is coming out at the end of this year. No wonder his favorite show is The Simpsons— he admits

not having watched TV for a long time.

The intensity of his life got me very curious: *why* is he doing the Divided Family project? What could have possibly ticked this already sleep-deprived physician-in-training to sacrifice more hours of his sleep?

**Q. So what made you decide that you would direct a documentary about divided families?**

A. I first got interested in this issue while I was in Korea on a Fulbright Fellowship. I worked with *Saemsoni*, a Washington D.C. based organization that works for family reunifications between the Korean Americans in US and North Koreans in DPRK. It's part of the Eugene Bell Foundations.

**Q. Okay. Was there a personal trigger as well?**

A. Growing up, I was very close with my grandmother. She had a sister in the North that she always missed—meeting her sister was her lifelong wish. While she was in hospital for cancer, my grandmother finally got a letter from the sister telling that she was alive. But grandmother passed away soon, and our family had to send a photograph of her funeral in return. Working with *Saemsoni*, I realized that stories like these were not uncommon among the first generation Korean Americans—and yet so little stories are told. I began to wonder why there wasn't more awareness within the immigrant society. Perhaps our parents were too busy. That's why I felt that someone has to tell this story and leave a record of what happened.

**Q. But why a documentary film? Did you have any previous experience in film making before this project?**

A. Well, I once took a Spanish Cinema course in which we had to produce a short film. I was also always interested in documentary because it's such an effective way to tell stories than books or newspapers. But no, I had no professional experience. Our project was a sheer collective effort with almost 90% of the job done by volunteers and we had to pay for professional cameramen and equipment.



**Q. So how far are you with filming so far?**

A. We are almost done. We have our last 20 min. left, which is our last interview (we are still looking for a cameraman). Now we are doing lots of editing and the film should be out at the end of 2010, and we are planning another screening in spring. It's a product of a great teamwork.

**Q. Where do you get your funds? It must cost you a lot to go back and forth from Korea to the US..**

A. Honestly, there was a lot of arm-twisting with friends to make them do things for us

(laughs)... but we had a fundraiser in New York, 2009, and raised about \$15,000. There were lots of private donations and people were very good about it.

**Q. So when you are done with the film, what will be your next step? Also, do you think this project will affect your future career?**

A. When we are done we are planning to hold public screenings and also would like to send this film to festivals, just to see how far it can go. And yes, I'm interested in health and human rights in North Korea. My life's mission is to provide public health care to the poorest of the poorest.

**Q. Well...did you ever feel like giving up? I mean, you got a huge donation, news coverage in Korea and all, but were there any moments when you just wanted to let go of everything and hide?**

A. I can't say there wasn't a moment like that. But you have to finish what you start. Also, seeing the bigger picture really helped, too—we have the responsibility to the families we interviewed as well as to the funding we got. Just need to be good stewards for that. I also learned so much from this project. Making the film, I put into practice much of the leadership skills I learned from the Kennedy school. It taught me a lot about managing people and also leading a group.

**Q. What does your family or friends say about this project? Weren't they worried that you might burn yourself out, being a medical student and a film director at the same time?**

A. Yeah. My mom always tells me to keep taking your vitamins... she was worried at first, but now she understands how important it is to tell this story. My best friend says, "Jason, I'm not envious of you. You bring it all onto yourself".

*Honestly, more than his being a medical student or going to Harvard, I was more impressed and jealous of the real-life skills and insights he seems to have gained through this project, the people he must have met along his journey and the richness of the experience overall. After we were done, he took the Red line at Harvard Square to get back to his beloved hospital ("I'm so glad to be a medical student again—watching babies being born is just amazing"), where he would spend the night again. And I stood there watching him walk away, wondering how far his passions would take him.*  
Gi Yoon

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