



OUR JOY IN THE SPRING: CHOON HEE CHO

Choon Hee Cho at age 84, completed her journey on earth December 28, 2020 and we were surprised because we saw her twice in November, as sharp and spritely as ever. We all called her “Choon” which in Korean, means “Spring”, not knowing that her middle name “Hee” means “Joy!” and we were all lucky to have known, this lady of joyful optimism--Choon Hee Cho, our dear friend and co-worker, our Korean Mom and Grandmother. She definitely was always family to us and our deaf community.

I first met Choon in the late 90s at a community forum for the independent living center of East Los Angeles. She was very forceful and persuasive in speaking up for the deaf community needing independent living services, too. She read lips and did sign language in both Korean and English. She held her audience, keeping their eyes focused on her as she made her points. Her hair was still black then with a few silver streaks and she wore it short and very curly. In her youth, I could tell that she was a very lovely lady, a classic Korean beauty and I was curious about her disability story.

Choon was raising her only one son until one day, she came down with a very strange fever that caused her to lay in bed for a devastating week when she lost all her hearing. Her son was only a year old and Choon was now a widow after the husband died early. Choon decided to bring the family to the US eventually and she arrived in Los Angeles when she was only 40 years old. She had to learn American English very quickly and she quickly became involved in the Deaf community.

Choon was always keenly interested in helping people and her joy often came from a feeling of satisfaction that she had provided very concrete help to people needing all kinds of services. When she finally had to retire, the office where she worked as an advocate had to close but I remember her very well and her co-workers who eventually joined our staff suggested to draft her, even as a volunteer. She happily agreed and what was only being discussed as a possibility became a viable project assisting people with hearing impairments.

In 2017, we had a chance to travel with Choon to Washington, D.C. for the annual conference for independent living centers. There we had a taste of the entire disability rights movement and we were among hundreds of disability rights advocates and activists. Choon brought her 3-wheeled walker and went about the crowd meeting people and chatting up a storm. Whenever we had to move, like when we were making our legislative visits, she was the first to show up, outmaneuvering the others. She was supposed to have had a personal care attendant who could not keep up with her either. I will never forget at the airport, as we were getting ready to board the airplane, we were all famished and I offered her a banana. It was just what she needed—some food to ease her hunger and a nice soft banana peel scrub on her face! We were all giggling as she unabashedly rubbed the banana peel on her flawless face! Her red lipstick stood out better and her beautiful Korean eyes seemed to have grown more lashes with her banana magic. Choon made us all laugh but she was serious about the cosmetic wonders of the humble banana peel.

And then there were the pains of her aging experience. Choon embraced it without apologies—in fact, she was aging gracefully. She always came fully groomed without a hair strand out of place. Yet Choon never hid her pain—she talked about it openly and always shared how she dealt with it by working closely with her doctors, doing her exercises and eating right. She was also very open to alternative and traditional homeopathic remedies. But as a real trooper, whenever we had consumer events at CALIF, there was Choon, standing by the food as a volunteer,

with a ladle in hand and helping people with their plates, making sure, everyone had their share of the festive meal.

Apparently, even at the interruption of the pandemic, Choon was sought after. At the announcement of her death, we got word that where she used to live, people were calling and actually coming to the office just to verify that she, indeed, had passed on. Due to COVID 19 restrictions, we could not attend the family services but we celebrate Choon every day at CALIF. Whenever and wherever we bring joy, Choon is there and when Spring arrives, her Spirit says “Hi!”

Written by:

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