

# Intergenerational Program Profile: Koreatown Storytelling Program

## Overview:

The Koreatown Storytelling Program (KSP) is an intergenerational oral history and media project that connects high school journalists with community elders in Los Angeles's Koreatown neighborhood. The diverse, multilingual program aims to teach both youth and elders storytelling techniques to investigate cultural practices and examine the inequities faced by their neighborhood and community. KSP is a program of the Koreatown Youth and Community Center (KYCC), a nonprofit social services provider that has served Koreatown's limited-income majority Asian and LatinX\* community since 1975.

The idea for the Storytelling Program began in 2015 when KYCC approached then-Communications Director, Katherine Kim, about establishing an intergenerational program to serve the KYCC community. Katherine, a former journalist, had long wanted to capture the stories and lives of the elders in Koreatown, but with just her acting as both interviewer and editor, the process was slow and labor-intensive. KSP as it exists today evolved from this initial desire. Katherine and other KYCC staff would train students in oral history methods, preparing students to interview elders in the community while giving them the opportunity to gain journalism and ethnographic experience, all while establishing intergenerational bonds.

## Koreatown Storytelling Program

### Fast Facts

**Location:** Koreatown neighborhood of Los Angeles, California

**Established:** 2020

**Type:** Journalism, multimedia storytelling, oral history

**Participants:** High school students and older adults

**Population:** Asian and LatinX\*

**Description:** The Koreatown Storytelling Program, a project of the Koreatown Youth and Community Center, is an intergenerational oral history and media project that connects high school journalists with community elders in Los Angeles's Koreatown neighborhood. The diverse, multilingual program aims to teach both youth and elders storytelling techniques to investigate cultural practices and examine the inequities faced by their neighborhood and community. Students interview elders in the elders' primary language, with each cohort centering their conversations around a theme or topic relevant to their lives and their shared community.



"I feel like I've become more perceptive of the implications of COVID-19. I was worried about going back to school, seeing my friends, and upset about all the things I've lost about COVID-19. I realized that nobody really considers or thinks about the more marginalized, hidden members of the community. It's easy to focus more on yourself as a teenager during COVID-19... Who really thinks about the homeless, the elderly, and the incarcerated? **My elders were mentors, friends, and vessels of wisdom that I've learned so much from.**" - **KSP Student Participant**

## Background:

The Koreatown Storytelling Program launched in the spring of 2020 with an inaugural cohort of eight students and eight older adult participants. The first semester's students documented the lives of community elders in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic and mandated lockdown. Each cohort is organized around a theme, and subsequent semesters have centered stories around elder care, the experience of older workers in the Koreatown garment industry, and the 30th anniversary of the 1992 Los Angeles Civil Unrest. Students ask questions in the elders' primary language, with interviews taking place in Korean, English, Spanish and Tagalog. Prior to the interviews, students attend a workshop to ensure that they are comfortable and respectful in their interactions with the elders and are mindful of different cultural norms in communication. Elders undergo a screening process to ensure that they understand the expectations and scope of their participation- this screening also gives KSP staff the opportunity to gauge the elders' comfort level in discussing sensitive topics.

## Recruitment:

When recruiting students to participate in the project, KSP looks first to their immediate community at the Koreatown Youth and Community Center. The Center has a robust

youth services unit, including several youth mentorship and leadership groups. Katherine, now the dedicated KSP Program Director, also reaches out to local high schools, forging relationships with principals, teachers, and advisors to find students with interests in journalism and storytelling.

The most challenging aspect of the program is engaging elders to participate. Most of the elders in the Koreatown community are Asian American or LatinX\*, and many of them immigrated to the United States to flee conflict and instability and are hesitant to talk about the past. Others are uncomfortable being the focus of an interview. Katherine and the students have intentionally worked to build the trust of the elders by bringing care packages of food and medical supplies during the pandemic lockdown and assisting in the development of a



community garden. These community support efforts have transformed the project from an intergenerational exchange to a neighborhood strengthening initiative, enriching the lives of the youth and elders that call Koreatown home.

### Expansion:

Though the Storytelling Project was born from a desire to uplift the voices of a specific community, KSP knows that their method of intentional intergenerational journalism can enrich neighborhoods and populations far beyond Koreatown's borders. KSP staff is in the process of developing a curriculum geared towards guiding others in establishing and scaling intergenerational storytelling programs in diverse, multilingual communities. In Koreatown specifically, Katherine is interested in using food, gardening, and cooking as a way of establishing commonalities between generations and sparking conversations. Recognizing that formal, sit-down interviews may not be for everybody, she hopes that bringing older and younger participants

together through activities such as kimchi-making or traditional plant cultivation will begin a natural dialogue as elders share what these experiences have meant to them in their lives and extended communities.

### Conclusion:

Regardless of topic or format, Katherine recognizes that KSP has filled a need in Koreatown. In the early days of the pandemic, she and her staff were surprised by how eagerly young people wanted to help their community—a desire and earnestness that continued as restrictions relaxed and lockdowns lifted. **“They [want] to be engaged with elders and just don’t have an easy entry,”** Katherine says, **“and so if we create that entry for them, people [come] to us.”** This sentiment reflects a common truth—older and younger people in communities around the world long for connection, and programs such as KSP are catalysts for powerful, impactful, and vital intergenerational bonds to form.

“At first, when I met with the student, I thought to myself, ‘What could I possibly talk about with this young student?’ I was initially hesitant and slightly taken aback. However, as I was speaking on my personal strengths and weaknesses [during the interview], I realized that there were aspects of myself that I improved on through my life experiences. **Through this program, I developed a new perspective to keep improving to be a better version of myself.** This was a very enjoyable experience for me.” - **KSP Elder**



## Acknowledgements

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All photos in this profile are courtesy of the **Koreatown Storytelling Program**.

\* Generations United is aware of and understands that there are differing attitudes towards the term **LatinX**. We have elected to use this term in this profile as it is the term the Koreatown Storytelling Program uses when describing their community and participants.

## About this Profile:

This profile was created as part of Generations United's Diverse Intergenerational Program Initiative. Generations United is committed to elevating quality intergenerational programs that are inclusive and culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse. As our country grapples with race equity, inclusion, and diversity, we know that the intergenerational field plays a significant role. With support from RRF Foundation for Aging, Generations United is working to review and evaluate existing definitions and tools to truly reflect, include and celebrate diverse programs, encourage their development, honor their accomplishments, and support and elevate diverse practitioners and programs in the field.

## About Generations United:

The mission of Generations United is to improve the lives of children, youth and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit of all. For over three decades, Generations United has catalyzed cooperation and collaboration among generations, evoking the vibrancy, energy and sheer productivity that result when people of all ages come together. We believe that we can only be successful in the face of our complex future if age diversity is regarded as a national asset and fully leveraged.

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