

May Lee: Korean American Trailblazer

(Can be found on the [newest issue of Gidra](#), an Asian American magazine in Los Angeles)

May Lee was not a name you'd typically hear on television in the early 90s. Anti-Asian sentiment was at a high in the U.S. The Japanese automobile industry was undercutting American manufacturers, resulting in massive job losses. Anyone who looked Asian was a reminder of this threat. Yet, this is when Lee, a Korean American, began making a name for herself in broadcast news.

Lee grew up in Columbus, Ohio. Her parents had immigrated from South Korea and expected her to become a doctor. She followed this through until her sophomore year at Mills College in Oakland when she experienced a moment of total clarity that set her on a completely different path. She knew she loved writing, public speaking and visual media. Even though there were very few Asian American faces in the broadcast world—and even fewer of them were female—Lee realized she wanted to become a journalist.

In 1990, Lee became the first Korean American to anchor an evening newscast in the United States. She is one of the few who, against all odds, achieved visibility in American media when diversity was still an aspirational concept. During her 30-year career, Lee has covered stories from the Monica Lewinsky scandal to the 2004 tsunamis in Asia; hosted her own talk show for women in Asia and penned an autobiography. Now, Lee is an adjunct professor at USC, sharing her experiences and knowledge with future journalists.

Sylvia Kim, who met Lee through the Council of Korean Americans and the National Asian American Community Foundation, says that Lee is an example for young Korean and Asian women.

“May is a role model for many Korean women, like myself, who has really disrupted patriarchal notions of what a woman should or shouldn't do,” says Kim.

After Lee became a communications major at Mills College, she worked tirelessly. She did the internships, took part-time positions and, 60 resumes later, landed her first job as a small-town reporter in Redding, California.

“No one wanted to hire Asian faces at that time,” Lee recalls. It was in spite of the social circumstances that she was finally hired at Redding's local station.

“I was a one-man band [...] I did the writing, reporting and production. As a petite Asian woman, it was a challenge to carry a huge camera everywhere,” Lee laughs.

Being a broadcast journalist wasn't always smooth sailing. When she moved back to Dayton, Ohio to be a co-anchor on Channel 22's evening newscast, she received racist threats from local viewers.

“Go back to your country...we don't want your kind here,” Lee recounts in a drawling accent.

Being the first Korean American to host an evening newscast was just the first of Lee's singular accomplishments. Two years later, she received an even bigger break when NHK, one of the biggest television networks in Japan, hired her for their Japan Business Today segment. The show was broadcast to 25 countries and required her to move to Tokyo. This was the start of Lee's international career.

“I didn't think I'd become a foreign correspondent at the age of 26,” Lee says.

Katie Sargent, a friend and former colleague from Singapore accounts for the tenacity Lee possesses throughout her career: “She works really hard and doesn't give up, and she brings that to every project she does.”

Lee attributes her success to timing, luck and belonging to the Asian American Journalism Association. In the pre-Internet era, she saw the NHK job posting in one of AAJA's newsletters—just two lines asking for an Asian American who could do a business show for a Japanese broadcast channel.

Moving to Japan was not easy. There is a long history of tensions between Japan and Korea, so being a Korean American in Tokyo was challenging. The first time Lee experienced blatant sexism and racism was during an interview with the head of a huge Japanese conglomerate.

Before the interview, the man asked, "Where's the reporter?" When he realized it was Lee, she could see the disgust on his face. He stared at his shoes the whole interview, refusing to look at her. Still, Lee remained professional.

After NHK, Lee worked as a Tokyo correspondent then as a lead anchor in Hong Kong for CNN until 1999. After seven years in Asia, Lee returned to the U.S., where she co-hosted "Pure Oxygen" at Oxygen Media, founded by Oprah Winfrey.

Among her eye-opening experiences there, Lee recalls her interview with Monica Lewinsky. Like everyone else, she had her own preconceptions of the famous intern. Every night show host—from Jay Leno to David Letterman—joked about the then-22-year-old. Crude cartoons mocking Lewinsky's appearance filled top publications, painting her as a salacious homewrecker.

But getting to know Lewinsky completely surprised Lee.

"She was a completely different person," she says. In her biography "May Lee Live and In Person," she recounts spending the weekend with Lewinsky and, during their visit to the New Orleans House of Blues, telling off a disrespectful stranger who insulted the younger woman. The incident showed her what Lewinsky faced.

"It's a privilege [and] honor to be a journalist who is allowed to enter these people's lives [...] just because we say we're a journalist," Lee says.

As a journalist who's traveled all across the globe, Lee covered many heart-wrenching stories, but the most personal one was the 9/11 attacks. Lee lost a good friend in the World Trade Center, and it was the first time she broke down on camera.

Lee would see even more devastation when she covered the 2004 tsunami that struck South and Southeast Asia. Working as an anchor for CNBC, she traveled to Indonesia to report on the areas hit hardest by the disaster. There, she talked to a woman who described her baby being ripped out of her arms.

"I wanted people to understand this wasn't just property and just some faraway land that was devastated. These were people—people with real stories," she says in a podcast with the Korea Economic Institute.

Sargent, who worked on the "May Lee Show" says, "She's not just passionate about journalism, she's passionate about women and promoting women and helping them find their way."

This is exactly what Lee did. In 2008, she was in Singapore as a correspondent for NBC, and noticed glimmers of social change. Women in Asia were becoming more vocal. They needed a platform and Lee wanted to give them one. That's when Lotus Media House came to fruition.

Through her production company, LMH, she hosted the “May Lee Show,” which was broadcasted to 15 countries on STAR, an Asian TV Network. Citing Oprah Winfrey as her inspiration, Lee wanted to highlight the voices of women.

“[May] works really hard and she doesn’t give up,” Sargent says, recalling the show. “She brings that to every project that she does.”

Lee recalls, “It was the most difficult thing I did in my career.” The “May Lee Show” was a whirlwind. Lee was in charge of everything from production to editing and starring. After the first season, she was almost glad the network killed it.

“It was a little bit ahead of its time,” she says, “It wasn’t a success, but it wasn’t a failure.”

Although short-lived, the ground-breaking show highlighted the voices of women all over Asia—from entrepreneurs to animal conservationists.

Since then, the media has changed. A growing number of television shows and films showcase Asian faces, and Lee hopes that there will be more Asian American journalists as well.

“I grew up without seeing people like myself on tv,” says Lee.

To all the young journalists out there, Lee tell them, “if this is what you want to do, fight for it, push for it.”

After nearly three decades of trailblazing, Lee wants to do more with the Asian American community and its issues. Lee is a member of East West Players, an organization that raises the visibility of Asian Americans through theatrical productions. She’s also been involved with Council of Korean Americans and the National Asian American Community Foundation.

“We’ve reached a point where we can sustain the changes taking place,” Lee says, “It’s not a moment, it’s a movement.”