

Healing through acts of kindness

*Content Warning: Mentions of Suicide and Self Harm

The fluorescent glare of the hospital lights stung Mike Kim's eyes. As he reached for his phone to call his pastor for advice, he replayed the events of the day before. He had opened the bathroom door to find his father, who was battling terminal cancer, lifeless and covered in blood after cutting himself with a razor in an attempt to take his own life.

Kim had saved his father's life, but his worldview had come crashing down around him.

"It made me feel a ton of compassion and empathy for people that are going through things, and it made me realize how there's a lot of things that were bothering me about society," Kim said. "I think that was a moment where I just decided there's no intention or energy out there."

To an outsider, the world dealt Kim a bad hand. He had faced severe bullying throughout his life as a Korean-American. He had watched his father, mother, grandmother, sister-in-law and two friends battle cancer. He had watched those two friends die. Though his father survived his suicide attempt, he died from his cancer two weeks later.

But instead of succumbing to his negative circumstances, Kim did the opposite. While talking to his pastor, Kim realized he needed a light in his life. From that conversation, Kim created Some Neat Place, a company committed to kindness.

Kim immediately started talking to people doing impactful work and publishing their stories.

"I started writing, and I felt a very cathartic experience," Kim said. "I started to feel like I was healing my heart."

While Kim was motivated by tragedy, his mom lives life with a glass-half-full approach while tackling stage four cancer, open heart surgery and a fractured back. Her positivity also inspired him.

"You know, what if the world had a little bit more (love) and they had my mom as their mom?" Kim said. "Would we be in wars where we have turmoil? Would we have Republicans and Democrats yelling at each other?"

Initially, Kim planned to create a digital web design agency with the same name, but after watching his family and friends struggle, Kim knew his life had a larger purpose.

He committed to showcasing the good in the world through every avenue including stories, events, products and collaborations with other organizations. He's even made a hip-hop video about kindness.

"He's able to produce and create things that are a source of hope, a source of inspiration and a source of kindness for others in his community as well," said Joseph Mayang, a program coordinator for nonprofits whom Kim has mentored.

Kim threw a birthday party for Some Neat Place at Oseyo, a Korean restaurant in Austin. The party, which Mayang and Kim collaborated on, tapped into people's emotions and childhood nostalgia.

"When you feel like you're a kid, a lot of the time you're just expressing how you feel. You're authentic in a way," Mayang said. "And so the bigger picture for that was, 'Okay, how do we get folks to tap into their authenticity without making it hard for them to digest?'"

The celebration had sheet cake, ice cream, polaroids, vinyl records playing and a lot of singing. The camaraderie was joyful, said Kim.

Throughout the majority of his life, Kim struggled with a feeling of shame and the desire to fit in. Some Neat Place has prioritized promoting inclusion in events they throw, like the birthday party. It's like getting on a Southwest Airlines flight, and someone offers you the empty seat next to them, Kim said.

"It feels like we're able to bring a safe place for people to just really be who they are and meet them where they are," Kim said.

Kim is currently working on launching an app inspired by Pokemon Go that allows app users to earn Girl Scouts-like badges to gamify the experience of sharing kindness across communities.

"What if I intersected both those ideas together and created an app that teaches people how to be kind throughout the years, and it's not this six-week course," Kim said. "It's just constantly iterating on it."

Throughout the various avenues Some Neat Place works in, Mayang said a common theme is consistent throughout the work.

"The metaphor that I can describe Some Neat Place is that it is a neat place. Because it just allows you to take a step back from the busyness of the world and be in tune with yourself a little

bit more. It makes you reflect on the things that you love and what makes you happy,” Mayang said. “And in turn, you build a community out of that.”

For Mayang, Some Neat Place and Kim are symbols of hope that people can easily forget.

“A lot of times, the world gives us a lot of reasons not to be too optimistic about the fate of our world,” Mayang said. “But Mike is one of those people that restores the faith in humanity, that there are good people out here and there are people who are doing good things.”

While Kim has large aspirations, including his app and collaborations with larger companies, his purpose remains the same.

“Maybe I can be the light for someone, and I really don't care if I get a thousand likes on my posts or one. But if I reach someone's heart and I get to know who they are, I know I'm doing good work,” Kim said.