



## Against the odds

Roofing contractor Brent Lee built a new life in the U.S. after growing up poor in South Korea

by Krista Reisdorf

**B**rent Jihoon Lee was born in South Korea and grew up in poverty. Living in the countryside on the outskirts of Seoul, he didn't see a car until he was 7 years old. His first job involved walking up to the peak of a mountain to get spring water, walking back down and selling it.

On average, one out of 25 people in the area where he grew up went to college. When Lee, an only child, moved to the U.S. at age 15, he didn't know the English alphabet—let alone the English language.

Now, about 20 years later, Lee owns his own company, J & K Home Improvement, in Rolling Meadows, Ill. The company, which has been in business for six years, remodels about 350 homes per year with a sales volume between \$2.5 million and \$3 million.

"I started with nothing," Lee says. "I feel fortunate to work with a good set of guys and have a booming business."

But the road to owning his company wasn't easy.

### Overcoming adversity

When Lee was young, his father owned a small company and was a salesman for an export company. Lee and his mother stayed in South Korea while his father traveled and sent them money when he could. When Lee was 3 years old, he became so ill his parents were told he only had a couple of years to live.

"I had a virus, but they weren't sure what it was," Lee says. "They wanted to get me tested, but in a third world country it was costly. My family was not rich. My grandparents knew about Chinese medicine, so they fed me a medicinal soup for a year. I have been healthy ever since."

But there were other challenges to be faced. Lee's village didn't have cars because it was set in a steep area, so there were no



bus stops or cabs. Villagers had to walk 30 minutes to get to a bus station.

Lee's family also struggled to put food on the table.

"My mom always used to ask me to go to my uncle's restaurant and eat," he says. "I later found out it was because we didn't have food at home. I was grateful my uncle took us under his wing."

Additionally, educational opportunities were limited.

"It's tough making it through," Lee says. "You have to know people and have money to go through the school system. To get into college, you had to compete with 24 other kids. It's a small, overpopulated country, and there's a lot of competition."

Lee was given an opportunity to get an education when he and his mother moved to the U.S. to live with his father in Springfield, Va. But his early days in the U.S. school system proved to be difficult.

"I didn't even know the alphabet when I came to the U.S., so it was tough," Lee says. "I had a language barrier and no friends, but my personality helped because I was a people person."

"I met some people who helped me learn the language, including a Korean kid who grew up here," he continues. "He ended up learning Korean from me, and I learned English from him. He played football and basketball, and that's how I started playing sports, which also helped me learn English."

I couldn't play if I couldn't understand what the coach was saying."

Following high school, Lee attended Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, and studied business and information systems. He worked his way through college.

"I cleaned buildings, worked as a chef and worked at the school library," he says. "I loved it. It was a good experience and made me tougher and stronger mentally. It prepared me for living in a different area without my parents."

After Lee graduated college, he returned to South Korea for a few months to teach English before interning at Merrill Lynch in Richmond, Va. Then, a friend who was working for Allstate Insurance Co. in Rockville, Md., recruited him to work with car claims because Lee's father owned a small car-repair shop. In the meantime, Lee also was working with his father on government contracting.

"My dad took me around and taught me a small part of the business, so that helped me work with the guys and gave me a good experience," he says.

Lee moved to Chicago from Washington, D.C., in August 2003.

"I originally came to Chicago because of Allstate," Lee says. "But when a high school buddy started up a contracting business, he needed a marketing guy to promote the business, so I worked with

him for a year. But he had a daughter and wanted to move back home because he was living away from his family, so I looked for a different company."

### A life lesson

Lee found work with a contractor as a production manager and gained some roofing experience.

"I worked as a helper cleaning up job sites," he says. "One day, one of the workers wasn't feeling well, and I went on the roof to work with the guys. I liked being outside in the field."

But he faced yet another set of challenges.

"I found out the contractor had good workers but wasn't focused on work," Lee says. "When the business was failing, I noticed he was taking deposits from a lot of people and not doing the work. He was cheating a lot of subcontractors, having them work on the job but not paying the guys."

Although Lee couldn't write the checks, he tried to ensure workers got paid as the business continued to deteriorate. Soon, the company was out of business.

"One day, the office was closed," he says. "I was locked out. I didn't get paid for a month."

The setback, which included Lee being cheated out of \$15,000, led to Lee living

in his car and a hotel for a few months.

"I came to Chicago with pretty much \$200 and a suitcase," he says. "I didn't have relatives or friends, so when the contractor took off with the money, I had nowhere to stay. I had an apartment but didn't re-sign the lease, and I stayed with one of the workers for a little while until he left to work in a different state. I slept in a car for two weeks. I had all my stuff in the car and was ready to give up and head back to D.C. But I wanted to help the people who got cheated—it was the least I could do."

Lee had roofing experience but didn't have any equipment, so when he was contacted by a general contractor who heard he did roofing work, he used the money he had left to buy a compressor and nail gun and find some workers.

"Most of the guys came from the failed company," Lee says. "We started doing roofing work for a small contracting company."

In the meantime, Lee approached about 25 homeowners who had been scammed by his previous boss.

"I went to their homes and let them know their money was gone," he says. "I asked to see their contracts; if they had enough money to pay for material and pay for my guys' service, I said I'd work for free. I didn't have to make a profit."

At this time, Lee needed to establish a

corporation so he could go to a supply company and buy materials.

"I came up with the name J & K because it was the name of a small exporting company my dad owned when I was young," he says. "I had an old briefcase, and when I opened it, there was a small tag that fell out that said J & K. J is for my name, Ji, and K is for my dad's name, Kee."

Lee started J & K Home Improvement Feb. 14, 2005.

"A lot of people do business to make money, but that's not for me," Lee says. "Many people were laughing at what I was doing, and it kind of hurt my pride. Some of the guys in our industry were pointing fingers, but I figured one of these days I'd be OK."

Lee went to various supply companies to explain his situation and said he would get them the money but needed materials before winter came.

"A lot of distributors didn't want to help me because I didn't have money or an account, but ABC Supply Co. Inc., Beloit, Wis., actually gave me a small account," he says. "The founder of ABC Supply, Ken Hendricks, who recently passed away, was a good guy. He invited me to dinner and told me about how he started. People who have been in the industry longer than me have experienced things I can't imagine, and I have to absorb as much as I can."

### Building a business

J & K Home Improvement started out performing strictly roofing and siding work but has expanded its scope of work each year.

"We've gone down many different paths instead of doing one thing," Lee says. "We're always trying to broaden operations. We do seminars and training during the winter to stay on top of changes. We've started to use green and energy-efficient products. We are in a conservative market, so not everyone is jumping into it. But I'm trying to save some polar bears!"

The company performs steep-slope roofing work, mostly remodeling. Lee says his company is competing with other contractors who aren't necessarily ethical.

"A lot of new construction guys are remodeling, but they're not offering workers' compensation, and they're promoting cheap materials instead of quality products," he says. "There are a lot of guys coming from out of state who make as much profit as they can and then leave."

Lee says because of his past experiences working for an unethical contractor, his company focuses on quality.

"There are a lot of corners you can cut, but that's not the proper way to operate a business," he says. "If I wouldn't put it on my home, I wouldn't recommend it for customers' homes. We don't use low-end

products. We have to take pride in what we do.”

When it comes to managing his employees, Lee says he is laid-back and focuses on honesty.

“I tell them it’s OK to make mistakes—just don’t keep making them,” he says. “If you keep making the same mistake, it’s telling me you don’t care. And I tell them to be honest with clients. They’re paying our bills, so we need to be courteous and take care of the clients who trust us and allow us to work on their homes.”

Honesty and courtesy with clients has paid off. The scammed homeowners Lee helped were impressed.

“One of the homeowners I helped in 2003 lost his deposit for siding,” he says. “He called me, said he had a claim to get his roof replaced and asked me to do the work. It made me happy that he remembered.”

In fact, even during difficult times, Lee was making an impression.

“When I was living in my car in a 7-11 parking lot, this guy kept calling the cops on me,” he says. “I told him I was trying to save money for a hotel room. Every morning, he gave me coffee. Two years ago, I installed a new roof on his home.”

The day before Lee sends his crew to work on roofing projects, he calls the homeowners and thanks them for letting his company work on their homes. He believes his actions can set a good example for his workers.

“If the top of the water from the waterfall is clean, you will have clean water at the bottom,” Lee says. “I try to run a tight ship and an ethical business. I have walked away from business I believed was unethical. You have to be true to yourself. You know what is good and bad.”

Lee believes that has been the key to his company’s success.

“The quality and pride you take in your work are important,” he says. “You need to do a good job whether the homeowner notices or not.”



## A solid foundation

Lee’s success has allowed him to thank his parents for the sacrifices they made and lessons they taught him when he was growing up.

“I was an only child, and when I was young, my dad would give me chips and force me to share with everyone in the neighborhood, and I hated it,” he says, laughing. “But I thank him for it. He raised me so I’m not spoiled. He forced me to be more open and share. I’m here today because my dad was tough on me and my mom worked so hard for me.

“Your parents raise you, and you can pay them back for the things they sacrificed for you,” he continues. “I don’t need all the fancy stuff, so if I have money I don’t need, I want to put it to good use.”

Lee has 37 employees and also appreciates everything they do.

“I couldn’t do it without them,” Lee says. “It doesn’t matter how successful I get; I need to remember where I started and the people who helped me out.”

Despite his success, there still are things Lee wants to accomplish, including improving roofing contractors’ image.

“I wanted to bring my experiences and build a company where people would have less hassle,” he says. “As contractors, we don’t have the best reputations; so if we get the job done, homeowners may realize not every contractor is a hassle.”

Lee also dreams of opening a hospital or health insurance program to help kids who can’t afford medical treatment.

“One of my college buddies, who is a doctor, was building a clinic in Kenya, and I wanted to help him out,” he says. “In a country like that, if you don’t have enough cash to pay for the hospital, they’re not going to help you. There may be another kid just like me who may need a little support. There was a civil war, and my buddy lost a lot of his investment, so he reached out to me to make a small donation. I wish I could’ve done more.”

“I want to build a hospital myself to provide medical assistance in a poor neighborhood,” he continues. “My goal since I was young has been to be successful with whatever I do and pay back my community.”

## Being grateful

Lee says his life would be completely different if he had never left South Korea.

“I wouldn’t have gone to college,” he says. “I’d probably work at my uncle’s restaurant. I’m thankful for my opportunities and thankful to live in a country where I am free to have opinions. There is a lot of opportunity here if you work for it.”

Lee also appreciates the many cultures he can experience in the U.S.

“In South Korea, you don’t experience different cultures,” he says. “Here, you get to experience different countries, cultures and religions. It has opened my eyes.”

Despite his struggles, Lee has a positive attitude and loves to learn.

“Every morning, I wake up grateful to see the sunlight,” he says. “There are 365 days per year; if I learn two things every day, I’m going to be OK. That’s how I learned English. Every day, I learned two vocabulary words—not 10, not five—but I kept it up for three years. So after two years, I had a pretty good vocabulary and people could communicate with me.”

Lee is confident he can handle whatever lies ahead.

“When I was cheated out of \$15,000, I had no place to go,” he says. “I had to choose whether I would stay here or go back under the wings of my parents. I had confidence we could be a successful business, but it was tough for me. Everything dropped on my shoulders. People were screaming and yelling. I had no place to live and didn’t know anyone. But I guess everything else worked out, and nothing bothers me much.

“As long as I have a roof over my head, it’s OK,” he continues. “If people see good

people, maybe they’ll change their ways and behave differently. Somebody has to take the initiative.”



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