



SPECIAL REPORT II

In Memory of Dr. Sammy Lee, WKMJ's Very First Inspirational Healthcare Leader

Dr. Samuel "Sammy" Lee, the Eminent Physician and the First Asian American Olympic Medalist

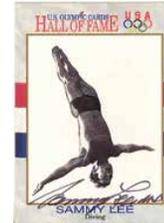
Samuel "Sammy" Lee, M.D. (August 1, 1920 – December 2, 2016) lived a full life with the achievements of a champion. He was a two time Olympic Gold Medalist in Platform Diving in back to back Olympics in London in 1948 and Helsinki in 1952. He was the first Asian American to win an Olympic gold medal for the United States. Born to Korean parents who dreamed of a better life away from the turmoil and Imperial Japanese colonization of the Korean Kingdom in the early 20th Century, Sammy grew up in California and became an inspirational figure of America.



My first encounter with Dr. Sammy Lee was during the Dedication of the Korean Studies Library at the University of Southern California. I was excited to hear him speak since we were both alumni of the USC Medical School. Sammy Lee graduated in an accelerated medical program in 1947 because of the acute need of physicians for the World War II effort on two fronts. Although he graduated after the VE and VJ Days 1945, he served as an active duty medical officer in the U.S. Army in South Korea from 1953 to 1955. Sammy was stationed in Seoul as a U.S. Army Ear, Nose, and Throat specialist and treated the first President of South Korea, Syngman Rhee.

Sammy encountered discrimination in many forms throughout his life. As a young diving trainee, he was only allowed to train at the Pasadena Brookside dive pool with other people of color, once a week on Wednesdays before the weekly pool draining and cleaning. He also encountered restrictive housing covenants and active petitions to bar him from owning a home in Orange County. Only through the help of friends like the young Richard Nixon, could he finally purchase a home there.

I had the fortune of meeting him again as one of the Keynote Speaker for the Korean American Medical Association Convention in Orange County in 2012. Sammy's eloquent speech inspired doctors of Korean descent from the United States, South Korea, and around the world. His inspirational speech helped us in the launch of the World Korean Medical Organizations at the meeting. He is the inspiration for all of our fellow physicians, as the most renowned doctor of Korean descent.



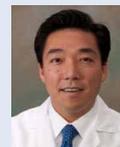
As an Olympic Champion, Sammy toured Asia on a friendly Goodwill Tour with the Department of State to enhance closer ties with peoples who needed the inspiration. Here he was, a non-Caucasian Olympian and doctor, representing the United States of America in diving demonstrations and speaking engagements. He even appeared on Groucho Marx's "You Bet Your Life" in 1956 with a partner from the Midwest and they both became the winners in the show.

Sammy was very active as a representative of the Pioneer generation for Korean American community life. He was sought after for many inspirational speeches and engagement throughout Los Angeles and around the world. Dr. Sammy Lee Medical and Health Science Magnet Elementary School is a school in Los Angeles Koreatown that has been named after him in honor of his great accomplishments.



Sammy was the first profiled physician in the Inaugural World Korean Medical Journal issue. I am proud to have been present during the interview where he represented us as a Korean American physician of true heroic distinction. The fact that he was able to train for the Olympics while building his early medical career is something that will rarely, if ever, be repeated.

We are proud to call him our founding father in the group of physicians of Korean descent. He will serve as an inspiration not only to Korean communities around the world, but to anyone who belongs to a small struggling group of people whether they are exiles, refugees, or those otherwise seeking freedom from political, religious, or economic oppression. That he was able to succeed during a time in America when civil rights struggles were just beginning will serve as a beacon of hope for all who seek the dream of better lives. We honor his life and memory and his story will forever be remembered. [W](#)



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As an award-winning director of MRI and Radiology Research, he works to improve access to imaging screening tests and increase the role of diagnostic and interventional radiology in improving the diagnosis and treatment of patients.

