

Behind the plexiglass: A corner store witnesses generations of love and loss in West Baltimore

Alissa Zhu, 12/30/22 6:00 a.m. EST



Tae Soon Lee talks to Der'eeek Fields' girlfriend, who is on speaker phone as he checks out, at Lee's Mini Market. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

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Behind the plexiglass barrier in Lee's Mini Market, which separates the aisles of colorful packaged foods from the private area where the shopkeepers brew their coffee and cook their rice, is a shelf on which Tae Soon Lee keeps a box of photos.

Inside are dozens of pictures: An elegant teen in a floor-length gown, chubby-cheeked babies and holiday portraits. They're mementos given by customers over the years — marking milestones and documenting growing families — to Tae Soon Lee and her husband, Kevin, who have owned the West Baltimore corner store since 1994.

There were more photos at one point, Tae Soon Lee said, but as her customers grew up and became parents and grandparents, she returned many pictures of their younger selves, frozen in time. There are many other memorable customers who aren't pictured: the student athletes whom the couple used to help support with donations before a nearby public school was shuttered, and the regulars whose lives were cut short by illness — or gunfire.



Pictures of customers through the years line the counter walls. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)



Kevin Lee and Tae Soon Lee go through a box of pictures given to them over the years by customers. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

The Lees have witnessed some of Baltimore's most significant challenges from their store at the corner of Fulton and Edmondson avenues, about two miles northwest of Camden Yards. They have weathered economic depression, seen the proliferation of vacant properties in the neighborhood and recovered from being burglarized during civil unrest spurred by outrage when Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old Black man, died from injuries sustained in police custody in 2015. They have watched other shops around them close up for good, leaving a food desert with even fewer options for groceries. While many other Korean American merchants — once a ubiquitous presence on street corners around Baltimore — have retired and sold their businesses, the Lees never left, working more than eight hours a day, seven days a week with few exceptions.

Nelvina Owens has shopped at Lee's Mini Market since she was young, and now she and her nine children visit the corner store multiple times a day, every day.

"That's why I call her 'Mama,'" said Owens, 48. "Everybody loves 'em because everybody knows 'em. She's been here for so long, it's like she's family for real."



Tae Soon Lee bags the goods bought by Crystal William, 35, (left) and Nelvina Owens, 48, (right) at Lee's Mini Market. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

Owens doesn't drive, so every month she makes one big trip to the supermarket. For anything else, she relies on shops within an easy walk of her home.

"This is literally the best store," she said, explaining that at other neighborhood markets, the inventory is limited and shopkeepers sometimes watch customers with suspicion, making them feel unwelcome. "This is the store that's got a little bit of everything."



Kevin Lee and Tae Soon Lee pose for a portrait at Lee's Mini Market in Baltimore, on Thursday, Dec. 1, 2022. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

Lee's Mini Market serves a [community](#) that is 97% Black and where half of families live below the poverty level, where there are few shopping options and [limited access to healthy food](#). As in most corner stores, the shelves at the market are stocked primarily with non-perishables: chips, canned soup, plastic-wrapped desserts and soda. It also has a limited selection of healthier offerings, such as rice and dried beans, lettuce, frozen vegetables, bananas, potatoes and onions.

While corner markets are a staple feature of Baltimore's landscape (a pre-pandemic count estimated there were about 630 across the city, according to a researcher), they don't get much respect. In 2013, then-Mayor Catherine Pugh castigated corner stores, accusing operators of selling unhealthy food, being open late and attracting crime. "It looks like a hellhole," she reportedly told the owner of one business.



Yong Sun Pak sits waiting for customers at Lee's Mini Market in Baltimore on Thursday, Dec. 1, 2022. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

Though some corner stores are just businesses that sell snacks to make a profit, others can become a pillar in their community, according to Emma Clare Lewis, a fifth-year Ph.D. student at Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health. Lewis works with a research team testing an app designed to [make it easier for corner store owners to buy and stock fresh produce.](#)

Since 2019, Lewis estimates, she has visited more than 100 corner stores in Baltimore. Over the course of her research, Lewis has met standout corner-market merchants who know every customer's name, stock new items upon request and care deeply about serving their neighbors.

"We have seen some corner stores become the focal safe space for people in the community," she said.



Kevin Lee talks with Anthony Austin, a customer who has been visiting the corner store for year, at Lee's Mini Market. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

Dozens of customers get buzzed in through the high-security entrance of Lee's Mini Market every day, and are greeted by Tae Soon Lee and her sister, Yong Sun Pak, who often lends a hand at the store. Some said the prices are too high, but overall, praises outnumbered complaints. Casey Weaver, a longtime neighborhood resident who often brings his gray-and-white tabby Bunky to the store to get petted by Kevin Lee, said the owners will let some regulars pay them later if they're short on money.

Al Saunders, a certified peer recovery specialist who works at a nearby substance use treatment center, said the Lees respond to the needs of their customers and clean up the street around their shop.

"She makes sure the neighborhood is taken care of," Saunders said.

The story of the Lees, in many ways, is typical of the thousands of other Korean Americans who have operated businesses in the city over the decades. Kevin and Tae Soon Lee moved to Maryland from South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s to join family. They got married after meeting each other at a Korean church and settled down in Ellicott City. After having children, they decided to buy the shop from another Korean American owner because running a corner store would allow them to be their own bosses. Kevin Lee constructed a bunk bed behind the cash register where their toddler son could play and nap while the parents worked. Profits from the shop supported the family through the years, long after their sons outgrew the bunk bed and started professional careers of their own.



Kevin Lee puts away bottles of eggnog at Lee's Mini Market. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

In other ways, Lee's Mini Market challenges some common narratives around Korean American corner store owners.

In 2004, the Maryland Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights released a [report on Korean American stores owners in Baltimore](#), which documented the tensions between Black residents and the immigrants who operated businesses in their neighborhoods.

“African American residents in various cities had complained that Korean merchants were disrespectful of black customers, did not hire blacks, and took profits out of the community, while Korean American merchants complained of harassment, vandalism, and robberies against their stores,” the report said.



Yong Sun Pak rearranges drinks between customers at Lee's Mini Market. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

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Tensions in Baltimore came to a head, the report noted, several times in the 1980s and 1990s, including when Black residents picketed a Park Heights Avenue store, with complaints that the Korean grocer was selling inedible food in 1996. Later, in 1997, robberies and shootings in Korean-owned businesses killed two grocers and wounded another.

More than a decade after the report, riots stemming from protests over the death of Freddie Gray once again revealed tensions between Asian immigrant store owners and Black residents. In April 2015, citizens took to the streets to protest police brutality and demand accountability from the officers involved with Gray’s death. Anger over racial inequities and systemic segregation also fueled the protests, which at times turned violent.



Tae Soon Lee takes a phone call behind the counter partition at Lee's Mini Market. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

A liquor store nearby was hit hard that same night, Slater said, and very little was left behind except broken glass. The liquor store owner closed up shop and never reopened, she said. The dusty storefront still sits empty across the intersection from Lee’s Mini Market.

More than a quarter of the 380 businesses looted or damaged in 2015 were owned by Korean Americans, the Baltimore Sun reported. Earlier this year, the city reached a \$3.5 million settlement with business owners whose properties were damaged or destroyed during that time. Included in the suit was the owner of Fireside North lounge and liquor store, John Chae, who was hospitalized with shattered facial bones after being attacked while his store was looted and burned. “Such a violation of humanity,” Chae said in 2015, according to the *Washington Post*.



Outside of Lee’s Mini Market in Baltimore on Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2022. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

“They’re Black; I’m Asian. That’s the thing I was thinking about. Would they be doing this if I was Black?”

Lee’s Mini Market was among the businesses affected by the rioting, according to Trish Slater, a close family friend who helped the Lees secure holes in the walls left by vandals after a night of rioting. Thieves had taken the cash register and some cigarettes, but the market was luckier than others on the street, she said.

Historically, the tensions between Black neighborhood residents and Korean American business owners were undeniable, yet there’s more to the story, said H. Yumi Kim, a history professor at the Johns Hopkins University who teaches a class on the history of Asian and Asian American communities in Baltimore.



Yong Sun Pak waves goodbye to customers as they check out at Lee's Mini Market. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)



Tae Soon Lee carries in groceries into Lee's Mini Market. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

The dominant narrative pits two communities of color against each other, Kim said, while ignoring the overlaps and interactions between the groups that go beyond violence.

“It does a disservice to only focus on tensions and conflict,” Kim said. “It shows one side, a very urgent side, but it can be dehumanizing to emphasize just that one particular narrative over and over again.”

Some corner grocery owners have made it part of their mission to be community-oriented by hosting food giveaways and special events for their neighbors, according to David Han, owner of Triple C Wholesaler, which has been providing supplies to corner grocery stores, carryouts and liquor stores since 1982.

“The ones who had a good relationship with the community, they survived better in Freddie Gray incidents,” Han said.

On a brisk and sunny December afternoon, Tae Soon Lee chatted with her customers as they paid for their purchases, asking about their families and pets. Der'eeek Fields, on the phone with his girlfriend, put the call on speakerphone when he got to the register. Delighted, the grocer said, "Hi, how are you? I miss you," adding that she hasn't seen her in a long time. The woman explains she moved to Columbia.

After checking out, Fields motions to Tae Soon Lee and asks to see her box of photos. Nestled among the baby pictures, he finds his 2016 prom portrait, looking serious in a suit. The young man grins and says, "I've been coming here my whole life."

While Tae Soon Lee is the friendly presence at checkout, her husband, Kevin Lee — known to regulars as "Mr. Lee" or "Pop" — keeps the store well stocked and organized. He goes shopping daily, making rounds at Walmart, Costco and B Green Wholesale, a distributor for corner stores and other small businesses. He takes great pride in keeping the store neat and organized. He lines up boxes of cereal and cans of vegetables in uniform rows. Price stickers must be placed roughly in the same location on every item, as to not obscure the label or expiration date. He carefully wipes down each jug of milk and eggnog with a clean cloth before placing them into the fridge.



Tae Soon Lee counts change after a customer leaves Lee's Mini Market. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

The daily routine of running a corner store has varied little since the Lees began in 1994. However, Kevin Lee has noticed one major change in the retail trade when he goes shopping at the wholesale distributor. Where nine out of 10 of his fellow customers used to be Korean, now it's only one out of 10, he said.

In 1997, [Korean Americans owned nearly 2,900 businesses](#) in Baltimore City. Now that number is much smaller, according to Han, the wholesale store owner. Today, Han has fewer than 50 Korean American customers. Most run liquor stores, he said, and even fewer sell food.

“First-generation immigrants who came from South Korea have retired, sold their businesses and they’re gone,” said Han, who is a past president of the Korean Society of Maryland. “There are very few who are left, and Lee’s grocery is one of the very few still operating in the business.” It’s part of a natural cycle, Han said. The small businesses in the city are powered by different waves of immigration. Starting in the early 1940s and 1950s, most corner grocery stores were owned by Jewish immigrants who came to the U.S. after surviving the Holocaust, according to Jeremy Diamond, who wrote “Tastemakers: The Legacy of Jewish Entrepreneurs in the Mid- Atlantic Grocery Industry,” documenting his own family’s history. “They didn’t speak the language, but they knew food,” Diamond said. “Food is a universal language.” Over time, those grocers left for the suburbs, retired or upgraded to larger food retail stores, Diamond said. Today, the cycle is continuing with Korean American merchants, according to Han. Many of their corner markets and liquor stores have been sold to immigrants from other parts of the world, such as Pakistan and India, he said, “and someday they’ll move on and someone else will take over.”



Kevin Lee poses for a portrait at Lee's Mini Market, in Baltimore. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

In January, Kevin Lee will turn 70. The serene and bespectacled shopkeeper has not taken a vacation in decades. It was considered a huge success by his family when they convinced him to leave the shop for an afternoon to watch the Orioles play the Washington Nationals earlier this year, according to Slater, the family friend.

“If you think about the hours, the days, the years they’ve been here, it’s pretty phenomenal,” Slater said. “You know, they’re like some of the hardest workers [I know].”

The Lees don’t have plans to retire yet, but they recently cut back their hours at the shop. They no longer work every day of the week. Now they take Tuesdays off.

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