

Living History with Ambassador Kathleen Stephens

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Witnessing South Korea's Post-War Economic and Democratic Growth Firsthand

This Living History features an interview with Ambassador Kathleen Stephens who served as the United States Ambassador to the Republic of Korea from 2008 to 2011. Ambassador Stephens was the first female ambassador and one of the few Korean-speaking senior U.S. diplomats to serve in that position since the opening of the U.S. embassy in Seoul in 1949.

In the first of this two-part interview series with Ambassador Stephens, she reflects on her experience serving as a young Peace Corps volunteer from 1975 to 1977 in rural South Chungcheong province and as a junior diplomatic officer in the early 1980s at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul.

During these formative time periods, Ambassador Stephens witnessed South Korea's rapid modernization and economic development firsthand. Not only was Ambassador Stephens a witness to South Korea's incredible growth over the span of just one generation (or "the miracle of Han River") but she was personally involved in making history at the ground level as a diplomat. In this interview, she gives an account of her experience dealing with student protests and sit-ins in Korea as a junior diplomat at the U.S. embassy during a period of tumultuous change in South Korea's democratic history.

Please see more below on this interview with Ambassador Stephens. This is the first part of her story.

Living History with Ambassador Kathleen Stephens - Part I



[Click on the interview questions below to navigate to the relevant answer section in the video.](#)

QUESTION 1: "What was it like living in Korea during the 1970s?"

QUESTION 2: "What was your impression of democratization in Korea in the 1980s?"

Ambassador Kathleen Stephens is the president and CEO of the Korea Economic Institute of America. Previously, she served as a career diplomat within the United States Foreign Service from 1978 to 2015. She was the U.S. charge d'affaires in India from 2014 to 2015 and the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in 2012. She served as the U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Korea from 2008 to 2011. Before moving to Seoul, Ambassador Stephens served in a number of policy positions in Washington, working as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 2005 to 2007, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs from 2003 to 2005, the director of the Department of State Office of Ecology and Terrestrial Conservation from 2001 to 2003, the deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Lisbon, Portugal, from 1998 to 2001, and the Principal Officer at the U.S. consulate general in Belfast, Northern Ireland, from 1995-1998. She has also been posted to U.S. missions in Croatia, Serbia, South Korea, Trinidad and Tobago, and China. She holds a B.A. in East Asian Studies from Prescott College in Prescott, Arizona and an M.A. from Harvard University's Kennedy School.

Sang Jun Lee is a research associate in the Korea Chair and helped with the production of this post.

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