

Independent film aims to dispel myths about Korean Americans

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Filmmakers Peter Lee (right) and Julian Kim discovered their love of filmmaking through the youth ministry program at First United Methodist Church in Queens, New York. (Photo courtesy of Jebby Productions)

Happy Cleaners, an independent film set in the diverse Flushing neighborhood in Queens, New York, is about a Korean American family that owns a struggling dry-cleaning business. It's an attempt by filmmakers Julian Kim and Peter Lee, both United Methodists, to confront some of the assumptions often made about their community.

"I think when you see images of Korean Americans depicted on-screen, they're always the kind of side character . . . and definitely stereotyped," Kim said. "Sometimes it's a model minority, a very kind of silent [person] who works hard and achieves big dreams."

“We’re struggling, working-class Americans like many of you out there,” Lee said. “So, let’s just connect on that level. I hope that we’re able to share that a little bit [in *Happy Cleaners*].”

The film is a low-key slice-of-life story about the Choi family, who are struggling to keep their business afloat against challenges including a condescending landlord, rude and threatening customers, and some family dissension.

“As a Christian, I am proud of the aspirational themes of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation embedded in this film,” said HJ Lee, a producer of the film and cofounder of KoreanAmericanStory.org, which helped finance it. HJ Lee attends HA:N United Methodist Church in Manhattan, which is also the home church of Peter Lee.

Methodists were instrumental in getting the film made. “All the cowriters and producers met, grew up, and were nurtured at First United Methodist Church in Flushing,” said Charles

Ryu, the pastor of Morningside United Methodist Church in Manhattan, who also acts in the film.

“[Julian Kim and Peter Lee] discovered their love of art and filmmaking through the creative youth ministry that First United Methodist Church provided,” he said. “Their youth pastor utilized film and filmmaking as integral means of youth ministry.”

The Flushing church served as the base of production during the 21-day shoot and was used as a setting in the film.

Ryu noted that the role of religion and the church in *Happy Cleaners* is subtle.

“It’s in the background,” he said. “You see them praying before meals. They talk about church, and when they need help, they get help from a fellow member of the same congregation.”

The film is ultimately about “family love,” Peter Lee said. “Unfortunately, today we live in a world where divisiveness is still present, and so we want to share a story about taking moments to appreciate the loved ones around you and make efforts to communicate and understand each other. . . . Find redemption maybe, survive together, and hopefully thrive together. And celebrate life.”

Happy Cleaners is available to stream on Apple TV, Amazon, iTunes, Google Play, and YouTube. —United Methodist News Service