

Humanities Studies Rekindle Hope for Homeless

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Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon says, "Thinking, not money, breaks the vicious cycle of poverty" during a lecture at a humanities course for the homeless and low-incomers. / Courtesy of Seoul Metropolitan Government

By Bae Ji-sook
Staff Reporter

It's seven o'clock in the evening, time for people to loosen up and take some rest.

However, at Seoul National University (SNU) Shinyang Center, the night has just begun. Twenty-eight people have just gathered in a seminar room — they are dressed in rather rugged clothes and seem not to have paid much attention to their appearance — but their eyes are sparkling as they wait for someone.

It was the fifth session run by the St. Francis College's humanities course for homeless people. Ten of them already graduated from the fourth session while 18 were newcomers.

Soon after, several other people entered — Rev. Lim Young-in of the Korean Support Center for the Homeless; Prof. Kim Nam-duh; Prof. Ahn Sung-chan and Prof. Kim Weol-hoi of SNU.

True Self

The first class was about Confucian theory of "Via Media."

This is more about mediation — never to allow one thing to get ahead of another. Kim Weol-hoi suggested that it was more about living every minute and making one's best effort. "Putting your 100 percent to where you are

is the true Via Media,"

Soon, the room became full of debate. Quotes from Niche, Deleuze and Mencius came up and in the end, professors had to step in and finish the class well after 10 p.m..

Kim later said he was impressed with the enthusiasm and the energy his ``students" were showing. ``They were much better than my students in the classroom. Maybe they don't seem as smart but they tried to understand every bit of the lecture," he said.

Ahn, who has organized the courses together with the Anglican Church reverend Lim, said people are craving to learn more. ``I have been with them for three years and we have trained them to think deeply and extensively. I bet they can get along with any people out there. You will be amazed to see how many books they have read," he said.

Up to July, the classes are still going well and he is receiving more calls from more groups of people for help, namely rehabilitation through humanities studies.

Choi, a student in the class, said he values this study more than anything. ``I have lived my whole life chasing after money and fame, but failed to get any. The study brought back life and a goal for me," he said smiling. ``I look forward to these weekly classes," he said.

He recalled that it wasn't easy at first but things soon took off. ``There are still some challenges. These teachers — they call the students teachers, too, as a way of expression that scholarship is always progress between the giver and the taker of knowledge. They are more sensitive and they dare to accept many new things in life," he said.

Spiritual Foods

Lim was inspired by a global movement providing a second chance in life for less privileged people through humanities studies.

The move started in 1995 in the United States. Journalist and social worker Earl Shorris established the Clement Course for the Humanities to give drug addicts, prostitutes, former inmates, homeless people and others a chance to get ``spiritual food."

According to reports, Shorris was inspired by one of his interviews while he was researching the ``vicious circle of poverty." The interviewee, who had been imprisoned for eight years on murder charges, told him that people are poor because they lack spiritual lives — access to museums, concerts, galleries and libraries.

The Clement Course was a success — out of 31 first-term enrollers, 17 finished the courses. Fourteen of them gained credits at Bard College in New York and two became dentists, and one former drug addict became a drug counselor. Most of all, all the participants said they have gained new energy, drive and hope in their lives, they said.

Shorris said in an interview that people can change through study and learning. He said that people get to reflect on their lives and dream of living another life, which is the goal of all study.

His example is now taking off in Korea. With the success of St. Francis College, which isn't exactly a government-authorized college as a higher educational institute, local governments as well as other educational institutes are setting up projects. The International Digital University has signed up with a Christian group and a homeless charity group to provide them with humanities classes in June.

Igniting New Hopes

“If we really care about them, it should be beyond providing simple bread and butter. We should let them awaken their self-esteem and let them dream of a second life,” Lee Jong-rok, the school's president said.

The university is planning to help the homeless obtain certificates or other skills for them to make a living by themselves. “We think the future is very bright,” he said.

Seoul has also stepped up to tackle the issue. The city government assumes there are about 3,000 homeless people in the metropolitan district. They find humanities studies crucial for managing themselves, and are planning to provide the “Human Seoulites, Humanities Course” classes to more than 300 this year.

So, why does it have to be the humanities when everyone is talking about financial difficulties and all the issues are about money?

“People are tired of the rat race and materialistic lifestyle. In a times of such difficulties it is very natural for people to question what life is and what it means to us — and this can be found through studying the humanities,” Kim Nam-duh, director of Institute of Humanities, at Seoul National University, said.

Scholars stress that the studies are not charity. “It is nobles oblige — we share what we have with people who do not have it,” Kim Weol-hoi said. “But most of all, we learn things from them, too. Old philosophers have said ‘When there are three people, there are always things to learn from them,’” he added.