

Human Rights – Conversations Across Generations

Episode: Harold & Emily Koh

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Transcript of audio conversation

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:04

Hi, welcome to our podcast, Human Rights: Conversations Across Generations. I'm Meredith Lockwood, founder of Lockwood Creative, a purpose-driven creative agency. And I'm here with my dad.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:16

And I'm Professor Bert Lockwood, the director of the Urban Morgan Institute for Human Rights at the University of Cincinnati College of Law.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:27

Together, we are your father-daughter co-hosts.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:29

For over 50 years, I've had a front-row seat to the evolution of international human rights.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:35

And now, we're sharing that expertise with you by connecting to the powerful stories and insights of human rights voices from around the world.

BERT LOCKWOOD 0:43

We bridge the past and the present, making complex human rights issues more approachable and understandable.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 0:50

So, pull up a chair and join our table as we speak with Nobel Peace Prize recipients, political leaders and the world's leading human rights scholars and activists.

My dad and I are excited to begin a special two-part series. Today, we get to welcome our very first father and daughter duo to the show. My father's esteemed colleague and a true giant in international law, Harold Koh. And his daughter, who happens to be my very dear friend, Emily Koh. As a former dean of Yale Law School who has served five U. S. presidents across five decades, Harold has shaped the human rights landscape for generations. It is in the same spirit that his daughter, Emily, has also dedicated her to social impact and women's rights, including her former role at the White House in the Biden administration's Gender Policy Council. So, this conversation is especially meaningful as it represents a true multi-generational dialogue on human rights and our shared passions for justice that truly connect us all. And don't forget to tune in for part two.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:05

So I want to do a warm welcome to professor Harold Koh and his daughter, Emily Koh. Welcome to the podcast.

EMILY KOH 2:13

Thank you so much for having us.

HAROLD KOH 2:15

Be here.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:15

it's just an honor to have you both. And I can't wait for this conversation. usually we start with my dad and our guests and how they met. An sometimes we go all the way back to the 1960s,

HAROLD KOH 2:27

Can I just, uh, ch in about. How I met Bert, um,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:30

Yes.

HAROLD KOH 2:31

I consider Bert, the OG human rights.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 2:36

I like that. I'm going to make him a shirt.

HAROLD KOH 2:39

Yeah. I think Bert may be, you know, a couple of years older than me. um, when I was leaving the government, I met a couple of people who had. had taught at university Cincinnati. How mayor, um, uh, very nice guy, uh, Michael Glennon. And they told me about Bert and then I met Bert, and he was the editor of the human rights quarterly. And at the time I wasn't teaching human rights, but he told me, uh, if you ever want to publish something, you can publish in the human rights, quarterly, which I thought was very nice. And then we'd gotten into the, habit of sort of visiting each other at the American society of international law where Bert would overwhelm me because every time I saw him, he'd give me another book. And I thought, yeah, I'm sitting around doing nothing.

And I didn't really even get into human rights per se until I started teaching in 1985 full time. but I, I didn't really start teaching human rights until 1993 or something like that. And then, I became head of the shell center of human rights at Yale, but Bert had been head of the urban Morgan Human Rights Institute at Cincinnati for years before that. And I think Bert was kind of following the footsteps of folks like Lou Henkin, I don't know, Bert, who some of your inspirations were, Bert has certainly been an inspiration to me.

BERT LOCKWOOD 4:03

Well , uh , late, colleague, uh, Drew Days. Um, I, just one of my favorite people, um , but he came out to Cincinnati um, 1982. Um, because, he said he wanted to, uh, model, the new human rights center that he was creating at, Yale after the, uh, uh, Morgan Institute. what I think was the principal, thing he took back, um, was that he became reassured that. You could have a, human rights very limited space because of Yale, there wasn't any, I think he had come from government where he assumed that you needed to have, you know, a palatial, place to, uh, have a prestigious institute. When he came out to Cincinnati and saw uh, uh, uh, we did not have that, that, that was the principal reassurance that he took that he could go ahead start the, uh, Schell Center at Yale, but, he was a wonderful, very modest, uh, individual, uh, but what are your predecessors?

HAROLD KOH 5:11

we're dear friends. We're dear friends. one of the, one of the ironies of it was that the Schell Center was named after Orville Schell, uh, you know, who is deputy director of Human Rights Watch. But he actually, um, went to Yale college as Emily did, but not to Yale law school.

BERT LOCKWOOD 5:29

Oh,

HAROLD KOH 5:30

he apparently, he went to another law school north of here, which he didn't like. And so, so when they decided to endow the center after, uh, name it after him, uh, they thought they would call it the Schell Center at Yale Law School rather than of Yale Law School. So they couldn't be part of. And that was some of Drew's, uh, uh, cleverness here, which I'm sure he picked up from you.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 5:56

So Em, I was going to share with our listeners how we met. and Em, please chime in. Emily and I are both former New Yorkers. I am now out here in Portland, Oregon and Emily, you are in.

EMILY KOH 6:08

I'm in Washington, DC.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 6:10

So we met, Oh my goodness. So 20 would have been 2018.

EMILY KOH 6:16

Yeah, I probably, it's probably seven to 10 years ago now.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 6:20

Seven to 10 years in that realm. we were both working and living in New York city and we had joined a women's co-working space called the Wing. And I remember coming in on a Saturday,

in the Soho location, and just being like, you know, it's a beautiful day out. and I really didn't want to do work, but as a social impact entrepreneur, I had to get some things done. And I thought I'd have the whole space to myself. So I went to the very front of our co-working space so I could at least look at the sunshine and blue skies. And there was one other person there. And I didn't introduce myself at first because she was like heads down, typing away. Um, I didn't want to bother her. but about like 40 minutes later I had to bother her cause I needed the outlet for my computer charger. And I was going to ask if we could share. and then I think we just ended up sparking conversation. I think I asked you, what are you doing here on a Saturday? Uh,

EMILY KOH 7:14

I know, I, I'm remembering now that I was trying to think what was the incident that got us talking because we were really focused each alongside each other at first. And then I remember, and I've, I rarely have had this happen where there were multiple areas of overlap. So first we found out that we had a mutual friend in common, um, my friend from graduate school, your friend from Amsterdam, and you had just returned to the U S after living in Amsterdam for a number of years. Then we realized that we had fathers who were not only in the same line of work and both professors, but also who knew each other. And then, you know, we realized that we just had so many other areas of overlap, bo in terms of what we were passionate about, um, and just where we were in our lives. And, I really feel like that initial conversation, we felt like we were really close friends immediately. And then that conversation has just continued at that level of excitement and, know, ongoing curiosity about each other's lives that really now has lasted for, for many, many years.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 8:22

Yes. I could not have said it better. And do you remember I was like, your dad's an international human rights lawyer. My dad's an international human rights lawyer. your dad's at Yale. My dad's at University of Cincinnati. they must know each other. And I called my dad and put him on speaker and your dad, Harold, you're savvy enough to text. My dad does not text. So you're like, I'm going to text my dad. I was like, I'm going to call my dad. And, and, and Bert answered. And I was like, dad, do you know, professor Harold Koh at Yale? A could, you know, and he was like, yes, of course. And then he told me all about your career. And I was like, I'm sitting next to his daughter, Emily. an fast forward. Now we're all here on a podcast talking about both of our dads, incredible work and legacies. talking about collaborations, um, I just got to have the honor of working with Emily and Harold, with Harold's Law Clinic and your wonderful students, to support Harvard, as well as their international students and all international students at that matter, through a social media campaign. and Emily's one of the most brilliant minds I know from strategists to writing to marketing. So it was my honor to be able to work with both of you. you know, sometimes I've gotten feedback that If you're not a human rights lawyer, how can you be involved in international human rights? And I think Emily and I can share our stories that from being creative to strategists using our skill sets and our passions for storytelling, connection, building bridges, is really paramount to the world of human rights.

HAROLD KOH 9:56

Let me just say a word about that campaign, because I think it illustrates sort of the substance of what Bert and I and now you and Emily have been doing, which is, you human rights operates through global networks, some of which are illegal. And so there was a time when taking human rights abroad meant that you could litigate issues of law in different courts around the world, and then that number of courts expanded. now, increasingly, influence and ideas spread social media channels. So if a decision maker could get a brief that takes a month or two months to produce, or they could see something which changes their mind, I in their bed looking at their phone at night. And what we were talking about, Emily and I, We were talking about how the Harvard student ban was so incredibly counterproductive. An one of the reasons why was because it would cut off these networks,

American students who are going to be learn from students abroad and vice versa. one of the things we were talking about was how many students from abroad go to Harvard and become educated. And that includes my own father, Emily's grandfather. Emily started to say, well, we should develop a graphic which shows this and pick some leaders. And that included, for example, Mark Carney, who's just been elected prime minister of Canada. Mary Robinson, you know, the former High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ban Ki-moon of Korea, you know, who later became secretary general. know, Benazir Bhutto, who's prime minister of Pakistan. José Santos, Nobel Prize winner from Colombia. And so we you know, you could you could just develop something. And then I said, I don't know how to do that. That's a great idea. But I don't know how to do that. And she said, what don't you know how to do? I said, I don't know how to do any of it. I don't know how to. She said, we could do it on Blue Sky. I said, wha you know, I don't even know how Blue Sky operates. She said, you know, we can't just, like, do it. We have to have a media plan. So we need content. And then we need plan. You know, in court, you just go and you file the brief according to the schedule and the rules. But here, these rules are being developed by the social media norms themselves. So that's where we picked a and I had asked him whether he wanted to be kind of our media person. And then after a while, we started calling him our head of comms.

And then, uh, we connected with and then you the graphics, Emily and the students developed the text. you figured out the dispersion plan, and it all got out there. and, uh, the litigation is still going on, but, uh, this is now an independent product. And I, I think what we now realize is that, you know, you could write an amicus brief that gets read by almost nobody, or you could have a big flash impact by just looking at something that could influence a lot of people and change their minds very quickly. And then they talk to others, et cetera.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 13:19

Absolu. I mean, it's, it's truly the power of social media. you know, I, I sometimes have a lot of criticism about social media, but it really does have an incredible effect for the bandwidth it provides. of busy schedules, attention span, and we've gotten into this culture on social media of scrolling quite quickly. Well, what Emily and I can do is have a visual representation to engage and captivate an audience member so that they'll be able to swipe through and see the critical information we're sharing in a really digestible, accessible way.

EMILY KOH 13:56

Yeah, that's, that's exactly right. I mean, when, my dad and my mom and I were talking about this, and the clinics work in support of Harvard's international students, the first thing I thought of was the way that I would process this information would be in this highly way. And then what was so exciting was realizing that there was actually a collaborative partner that we could work with who would be able to bring this to life and who had the strategic and creative skill set to do so. And Meredith, you were that person. We also knew that you were so committed to these issues and to advancing human rights more generally. That just added to what you could bring to this partnership, core, that just gave us a different perspective and way of thinking about how to amplify this critical message outside of, you know, a court system or a legal framework.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 14:51

Thanks, Um, and you know, it really was really exciting getting to work on it and even making the connection to your dad and my dad. But before we start chatting more about our dad's legacy and body of work, Em, I would love to talk about your incredible work. From your time with the Biden administration at the White House from Time's Up and much more. You're one of my dearest friends and proud to be a comrade in the space of social impact. And I just want to pass the mic to you to talk a little bit about your work before we pass it off to our dads. Yeah.

EMILY KOH 15:23

Oh, thank you so much. Yeah, I've really had the privilege of building a career now focused on gender equality and advancing gender equity, both here in the United States, but also around the world. And, I learned so much from both my dad and my mom about what it means to build a career and a life that is really purpose driven and focused on justice and human rights and, being of service to others. And so for me, you know, my personal passion has revolved around making sure that regardless of your gender and, um, regardless of, the current opportunities that you have, that everyone is deserving of equal rights, equal opportunity, both here in the United States and around the world. And that if we fight for a world in which that is true, we will all benefit. Um, unfortunately that's not the life that we live in now. But it's certainly one that, that I, and I know everyone on this call is committed to creating. And what I feel most fortunate about is to be able to be able to be able to do that work, but to now have done from many different vantage points and perspectives. So I've been able to advocate for, gender equality within organizations that are just starting out, within organizations that are inspired by social movements, like the Me Too movement, uh, to be able to work within government, both at the city level. I worked in New York, um, I worked in New York city government and then at the federal level within the Biden-Harris administration at the White House. And in each of those roles to be able to work that really brought together, public policy, the private sector, uh, grassroots organizing and advocacy. Um, and each of those opportunities has given me the chance to just see these issues and how to work on them from a different perspective and point of view. So it's, it's been wonderful and it's, it's work that I will continue to do.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 17:31

And Em, I have a question for you and our dads are welcome to chime in when you were growing up and having a dad who's professor, a lawyer, academic, did you work at all in any like volunteering or interning throughout your early days?

EMILY KOH 17:51

So the work that my parents did was, was very present in our lives in that we always made time, throughout the week and every day to really talk about what everybody was working on and how everyone was spending their time. So I feel like my exposure to their work was through those daily conversations that we would have in our house and just learning about what they were doing with their time, what issues they were committing to. I did spend a lot of time when I was younger at Yale law school. Um, so I got to see some of my dad's classes, spend time within those hallways. And when you're little, you don't realize what a special experience that is. But, when you, you know, get the opportunity to reflect on it later, I just realized how much that, shaped my understanding of the work that, that was happening. work and then I did a lot of work later that was really, yeah, more in a volunteer capacity, but very much inspired by, what I saw them do. And, you know, whether that was volunteering for political campaigns or, you know, working at organizations that were focused on writing and journalism, but ones that gave me an opportunity to investigate issues and report on them. In that way, uh, all of those experiences really helped shape my own interests. And I think we're guided by this principle that you should really enjoy what you do. and it should be a benefit to both yourself, but certainly to other people as well.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 19:21

Yeah, I love that.

HAROLD KOH 19:22

I need to tell uh, story that showed how Emily had picked up on the international law angle, which uh, when I was little, I was almost bitten by a dog. And so I have a little bit of a fear of dog, so we've never had the dog. uh, when we went to England, u,on sabbatical, the kids Christy and I wanted to go, but frankly, they on their own wouldn't have wanted to go. And when we got back, they said, we think we had to get a dog. And, uh, I said, well, I'm kind of opposed to that. And then they said, well, majority rule. I said, uh, Well, you know, I'm an international lawyer, and we believe that in the veto, all permanent members must agree. And Emily said, where was my veto when we went to England?

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 20:19

And Emily, you didn't become a lawyer?

HAROLD KOH 20:22

I think she was 11 years old, but boom, it came out like that.

EMILY KOH 20:28

You do, you do learn when you're the child of two lawyers how to craft a really well articulated argument. and then, funny enough, I think so many, yeah, so many stories from when my brother and I were little have incorporated into Yale Law School classes.

Uh, yo come up to me and share some, some anecdote from when I was three years old, that illustrated some, you know, key concept of civil procedure or some other, some other law school course. Um, so it's, it's been fun to realize the way that, uh, my dad has also brought our family into the classroom and just used, you know, used stories from, our family to illustrate, some concepts to students that, has really stayed with them over the years.

HAROLD KOH 21:27

if I can just illustrate, in, in a simple procedure, which I teach, you know, there's a concept called "forum shopping", which is how, uh, plaintiff's lawyers choose which court they want to be in, depending on where they get the more favorable result. it's a concept called venue. And when I learned it, it was taught in a very confusing way. And I was trying to figure out how to teach this. And while I'm doing this, Emily, who is at that point about five comes to me and goes, Hey dad, can I have some soda? And I said, no, no, no, it's bad for your teeth. And she said, Oh, okay. She didn't seem at all like upset. And, uh, then a couple of minutes later, as I'm still thinking about how to teach forum shopping, I hear her go, mom, can I have some soda? And she goes, okay, just this one.

You know, this is the best illustration, you know, even the child knows forum shop to get the result you want.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 22:29

That's so good. And that's in the book, storming the court.

HAROLD KOH 22:32

Oh yes. Yes.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 22:33

I

HAROLD KOH 22:33

Yes.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 22:33

love to see Emily in there. I was like, I know her.

EMILY KOH 22:35

I know I make a cameo.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 22:38

Um, okay. So I would like to take our conversation into talking Emily about your grandparents and Harold your dear parents who I know have been profound inspirations for your global work, throughout the world. and dad, I don't know if we could say that my grandfather who I called Gan, my grandfather was a lawyer, a judge, but I wouldn't say that gone was your human rights inspiration, but perhaps he was an inspiration for your law career.

BERT LOCKWOOD 23:08

So what I would say about my father, he was, he was self-made. and, said the only four years of his life that he wouldn't want to relive – it was in the midst of the depression, in New York where he was fortunate to be able to, um, get a job on Wall Street, uh, and go to Brooklyn Law School, uh, at night. Um, So he, moved to Utica. w I would say about my father is that he, he had a, a deep, belief in, bettering the community that he lived in, and was very, uh, civic minded. this was Utica, New York, which Utica, New York is sort of been in a state of economic decline, since the, uh, end of 19th century when the textile mills moved to the South and, and the like. And so, it's still, r, um, economically challenged, uh, community, And, he was, uh, elected to the, uh, Supreme Court, the trial court in, in New York. And at the time he was elected, Nelson Rockefeller created a Taylor, uh, Commission. And one of targets was to get rid of the mafia, which had a significant influence in, Utica. Michael Jordan: the judge that they used for the wiretaps various to the, uh, police, uh, was my father. And so, during period, unbeknownst to us, I was, I think probably about 11, uh, years old. the family would take sudden vacations. A we didn't know, but I mean, he was under death targeted to the family. that was a effort of ridding the Utica from the But as I say, he had a belief in the law. I can remember sometimes law when I was home, I would ask him a question. And would say, "I don't know the answer, but let's see. The law is reasonable." And he would then go through his reasoning as to what the answer must be on this belief that the law reasonable. I'm not sure Harold and I would necessarily agree with that assumption. But that was my father's belief. So I sort of hesitate in some sense because there were periods of time when he and I were prohibited from talking at the dinner table because of the arguments that we get into. So we didn't necessarily see eye to eye on many issues. But there. And I think I take from him a in trying to better one's community and a certain civic obligation definitely a respect individuals who have had make it on their own. love the fact that a significant part of our student body the first time a member of their family that has gone to not just law school, but has gone to college. I think that that is one of the roles of school like Cincinnati can play in terms of providing opportunities for individuals that did not have them before.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 26:41

So from there, Harold and Emily, I would love to talk about your incredible parents and their journey from North Korea and South Korea and coming to the States. Incredibly inspiring story. And I would love to take our listeners through it.

HAROLD KOH 26:59

Well, my father, Kwang Lim Koh, was born in a small called Cheju Island, which is off the coast of Korea. Just last night was the Tony Awards. An the best musical, which is called maybe Happy Ending is actually filmed or set in the island of Cheju, which I think no one had ever

heard of before. it was a fishing village and nobody in the village had ever even gone to school in Seoul on the mainland. so my father was just an extraordinary student and, um, he won a scholarship, went to Seoul where the university, Seoul National University, was at the time controlled by Japanese. And so there are only two Koreans in the school of Japanese, thousands of Japanese. And, uh, my father was first in the class, e though he was the only, one of the only two Koreans in the school. Um, which is a little bit like the other Meredith, James Meredith, being at University of Mississippi as the only black student, and he was just driven really by his desire to prove that Koreans were not inferior. And, he paid a price for it, which was that, they all became, uh, black belts in judo. but on the day of his graduation, when my father, the day before his graduation, when he was about to graduate as a valedictorian, the, uh, the judo master called him out tried to kill him in, in a match and broke his ribs, uh, punctured his And so he was, he was, he was in the hospital at his own graduation. and, u, many years later, when we would talk about discrimination, he would say things like, well, you know, it's hard for me to think of this as an issue of color.

Uh, a, uh, for him, the United States was a magnet it was the place where everything was possible. um, he came to Rutgers and did PhD in political science. and during that period, his PhD advisor went, went to Dickinson College where he met this 18 year old, Korean freshman, my mother, Hesung Chun. And, his thesis advisor said, you know, this is a very, uh, intelligent, Korean undergraduate. You should get to know her. and so my father decided that he wanted to get married to her without even really having ever met her and started writing her many letters. And after a while, she finally agreed to, to marry him. And then he got into Harvard law school, uh, first, uh, uh, LLM master's student and uh, jurist doctor, SJD candidate. and, uh, he studied first with judge Manley Hudson, who was on permanent Court of International Justice. Uh, one of the funny stories told is that on the night I was born was the only day that my father wasn't prepared for class and Hudson called on him. And, uh, my father said, I'm not prepared. And Hudson essentially said, why not? Uh, and my father said, well, we, we had our child last night. And Hudson. we'll welcome him to the community of scholars. And my father was so He proposed to my mother that I'd be named Manley. An my mother said, are you crazy?

Fortunately, they, they didn't name me Manley. Um, uh, and then later when Hudson passed away, his thesis advisor was Louis Sohn, Louis B.Sohn , you know, great professor of international organizations and, um, the law of the sea. Uh, but this leads to, I think is really the most important moment in, not just his life, but also my life, which was, because of my father's ties at Harvard. uh, he was very close friends with the Korean ambassador to Washington, a man named John Chang, Chang Myun. And, um, uh, Syngman Rhee's government collapsed. And, uh, so they had the first free election in the history of Korea. And, um, my father was asked by Chang, who decided he wanted to run for prime minister, whether he would, uh, come back and campaign for him in the South, where my father was hugely popular because he was such a great student. I mean, historically great student. And they were elected. but my father presciently, it turned out my children live in America. I have six children. they're American citizens. and, uh, I'd like them to stay in America. So I'd like to be the ambassador Korea to the United Nations or the ambassador to the United States. And so in

fact, they initially pointed him to the UN, but he was a, uh, observer nation and they didn't have that much of a say. So he has to be transferred down to Washington – so there are just two parts of the story I want to pick up on. One, he was an international student. You know, if international students were barred, uh, he would not be here from Harvard. Secondly, that, my siblings and I were, were birthright citizens. Um, you know, and, um, of course we've gone on to become professors and other things, but that would have been lost to, a future generation of students. but this leads to the most critical part of the story, which is that the government was overthrown. His government was overthrown by a military coup in 1961. Uh, and, he gets a call, um, saying, your government's going to be overthrown by, a junta. And, um, it was coming from various CIA sources, I think, who, who he knew at Harvard. and so he went back to Korea and warned the president, the prime minister. um, uh, he said, no, General Park will prevent the coup. and of course, General Park, Park Chung Hee, was the guy who did the coup. So by the time my father got back to America, the government was overthrown. so they had a meeting at the embassy, uh, called by my father, where he said, let's all take a drink. An oath that we will not serve, uh, military government. And I'd like everybody to sign this piece of paper. And they passed it around. And I think 50 people, more than 50 people find it. over the next few years, every single one of the people broke their promise, except my father. And so he was the one who ended up being exiled. U, and then a week later, or two weeks later, he suddenly hears that Chang, uh, Prime Minister Chang, his, friend is going to be executed. so, dad went to the White House to see the Deputy National Security Advisor, who was, who was Walt Rostow. And he y know, uh, this democratically elected Prime Minister is supposed to be executed. Is there anything the U. S. can do? And Rostow said to him, uh, we know where he is and he will not be harmed. And my father was just blown away. Uh, this scope of American power. Like these Americans can just say that this guy on the other side of the world won't be killed. And then, uh, Rostow, suddenly turns to my father and says, what about you? What are you going to do now? And my father said, I'm exiled and I'm unemployed and I have, um, six children. And, Rostow said, well, you know, you know, my brother is Dean of, uh, Yale Law School. Maybe he could teach there. So he calls him right in front of my father. And, uh, apparently the call lasted only 30 seconds. My father couldn't hear what was going on. And he just assumed, u, there's no way that Rostow, would have agreed to this kind of thing on the phone. And then I guess Rostow was kind of a, uh, absent-minded guy, professor. He put some papers on his desk and my father said, uh, well, thank you. I'm sorry that it didn't work out. And Rostow said, oh, oh, no, no. Can you get there in a week? And so a week later, we, each of us had one suitcase. We got on the train. We went to New Haven. four years later, I was Dean of Yale Law School. so I, I take away from that a couple of lessons about human rights. one, you, you know, America has enormous power to do good and evil in the world, as we see. it's really a function of how people exercise the power and authority they have. Secondly, the people in these busy jobs can do extraordinary things for people, but normally they're too busy to do it. And, you know, in retrospect, it was amazing to me that, the two Rostow brothers, one was a dean and the other was a public official, took the time to just do something nice with this family that's now completely stuck. and as it turned out, my sister and I both have tenure at Yale Law School. and, you know, that allowed Emily, and her cousins, uh, to pursue the life that, that they led. so this brings me to an intergenerational point, which is, and this has really sort of stayed with me. I often wondered, how did my father know, to

say, we won't serve a government that doesn't serve the rule of law? somehow he knew that, that was a basic principle that he was going to stand by and actually suffer for. And, how did he make that decision? You know, we're Methodists, and we go to church, we see this, once to every man and nation comes a moment to decide. How did he decide that? How did he make that choice? And it occurred to me over time, it turns out a number of things. First of all, recognizing that a moment of choice is coming, preparing yourself for it, and then realizing, this is going to be a moment where you have to choose principle or, expedient. And then deciding what you want to do. And so part of what we always try to convey to our kids, uh, Emily and Will, is, um, you got to take a stand. um, you know, and that even if you make a decision which hurts you in the short term, you'll feel it's a decision you can live with. Because my father lived with that decision. And finally, I should just add that even though they didn't overlap that many years, and my father loved Emily, you know, she was his first, uh, granddaughter, and she was born in New Haven. And my father was the third guy, third person to see her. First, my wife, obviously. And I was number two. But about 10 minutes later, my father came in.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 38:12

Oh!

HAROLD KOH 38:13

He actually announced, you know, in Korean tradition, the oldest, son, oldest, uh, male names all the next generation. And so he said, uh, we're going to name, we're going to name her Yeong, Yeong, which means beautiful and industrious. And we said, Oh, we're going to name her Emily. And we looked that up, and it means industrious.

One thing we knew was that Emily was going to be.

EMILY KOH 38:42

My strong work ethic. Ordained

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 38:46

Yes.

EMILY KOH 38:47

from, you know, minutes within my life.

HAROLD KOH 38:51

that's a long account, but I think, you know, I do believe how you prepare, you know, human rights is inherited. it's taught. And, these values are taught over the dinner table and in your daily life. And then the question is, how do you impart to others? and, and I remember when Emily was, you know, maybe eight or nine years old, I hear her talking to her friend and her friend is saying, well, I, you know, should I do this? Should I do this? Then suddenly I heard it. It was almost my voice saying, you have to decide. Like she said, look you have to decide, and I, you know, I,

that's

my, that's my girl.

EMILY KOH 39:41

There are two, there are two things that I'd love to pick up on there, which is that, you learn so much more as we often say by what people do versus what they say. And, know, over just hearing the stories about the decisions that my family members, my ancestors had to make and just the, the ripple effect literally across generations that that has created, makes me realize how important it is to take actions that actually align with your values versus just talking about your values. And also it just is an illustration of all the decisions that we now are going to be confronted with and have to make. And while they feel daunting in the moment, when you realize just what a profound impact that they can have and what an accumulative impact that they can have, have over time and what that just means for the trajectory of your life, but then the lives of the people that come after. So it really does put things in perspective and really does sort of anchor this idea of being able to promote and stand up for human rights across many generations and not just your own.

HAROLD KOH 40:53

Oh, and then why, why don't you say a word about mom and then also about Grandma Koh in Houston and things and how they expected you.

EMILY KOH 41:01

Yeah, I'll start talking about my, my grandmother and then my mom, but I had the opportunity a couple of years ago, it was actually during the pandemic to do an oral history of my grandmother. And it was incredible to hear about, her upbringing and her journey to America and, really to hear about so many life experiences from her perspective. She, y know, she grew in Korea and had a life there of, of privilege. Her father was a pharmaceutical executive but he and her mother taught, her and her siblings from an early age that regardless of their gender, they were seen as, people who had potential people who should use the opportunities that were given to them, to really make something of themselves and to try to do good. And she was the eldest, but she talked a lot about the importance that her family placed upon her. They didn't see the fact that she was a daughter or a girl as, know, limiting her, her opportunities in any way. So they really looked to her for leadership within her own family. And then, it was important to them that she get a good education and have opportunities. And so she came to the United States as a teenager. She studied at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania. Um, and then she has a tremendous interest that she cultivated at that young age in just what it means to be a citizen of the world and to think about the ways that different cultures, um, intersect and overlap. And that has been a real focus of both her academic study and then, a real passion of hers that she's taught us, over the years. What was striking was recognizing one, how young she was when she came to this country. And then two, just recognizing how few Koreans were in the United States when she came. I mean, you know, my dad told the story of how my grandparents and really, you know, part it was that there were just so few Koreans

here in the United States at that time. and so when my grandfather heard about my grandmother, she said that, you know, he, he wrote her and then they ended up at a wedding in New York city, uh, in which they were both attendees.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 43:29

Oh,

EMILY KOH 43:29

And she said he saw her and she you know, trying to blend in because it was not her wedding. Um, she, uh, she said that during the ceremony, he kept looking around and waving at her, and, you know, in her mind, I think making a big scene, to introduce himself

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 43:48

but

EMILY KOH 43:48

afterwards. and, you know, she, once, they were married, was really raising six kids, was trying to make life work here in the United States, without so many of the supports and privileges that she'd had, um, grow up in Korea. But, you know, by my dad's account and what I just know of her, she was so resourceful, so creative and just unbelievably, intelligent and, know, capable. And so, she not only raised her six kids, but, she, uh, really, made and carved out a life for her own intellectual work here in the U S, and was a real champion for, for gender equality issues. so she was telling me as part of that oral history about how she went to the 1977 National Women's

Conference in Houston. how that really shaped her experience of how, know, gender, uh, equality and

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 44:44

Wow.

EMILY KOH 44:45

gender policy shapes people's experience here in the U S, but also just gave her another way of thinking about these issues. and you know, to her tremendous credit, she's in her nineties and still as sharp and still is focused on these issues and carrying them forward for other generations as she has ever been.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 45:03

That's incredible. And how, what is she presently? I know she's in her nineties.

EMILY KOH 45:06

So she's 90, is it 95 dad?

HAROLD KOH 45:09

95 turning 96 in a month.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 45:12

Wow. Incredible. That's absolutely incredible. Oh.

HAROLD KOH 45:16

And another factor is that, you know, my mom is the Korean woman to get a PhD in America. You know, she got a PhD at BU in. 1959, with, with three children

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 45:27

Wow. you

HAROLD KOH 45:28

and more on the way, four children and more on the way. And incredibly, years later, we learned that she had marched in the graduation behind, behind Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. They were in the same process.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 45:42

Wow, that's incredible. And, and I'm, am I right both your parents were among the first Asians to teach law at Yale Law School around 1961?

HAROLD KOH 45:51

Yeah, th, they taught a course, actually they initially invited only my father and then, uh, they decided they would teach it together and call it East Asian Law and Society. So, it was part of the law and society movement. my father would teach about the East Asian legal system and my mother would talk about how society and cultural aspects, uh, fed into this. interestingly, she got a PhD in sociology. Uh, my nephew, Emily's cousin, Stephen, is now just got tenure as a professor of international law at BU, Boston University Law School, but he's also now doing a PhD in sociology.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 46:31

Wow.

HAROLD KOH 46:33

But, but , but we also wanted to mention Emily's mother, Christy, Mary Christy Fisher, you know, who started as an academic and then, taught consumer bankruptcy, has been a public interest for many years and, you know, just retired. But, but she won Connecticut Bar Association's Lifetime Achievement Award in Public Interest Law. She, she's the person who thought about doing anything but public interest law. But, but interestingly, she has bright red hair and she's, uh, Irish American and it turns out that her family is from Knock, which is very close to Ballyhaunis, which is where Mary Robinson is from. So,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 47:15

Wow.

HAROLD KOH 47:15

and Koreans are known as the Irish of the East, you know, because Koreans stand vis-a-vis Japan like the Irish do to England. So when I first met Mary Robinson, I told her that and she started including me in what she called the Irish Human Rights Group. And she would say.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 47:34

An honor, an honor

HAROLD KOH 47:35

" Harold Koh, Assistant Secretary of Human Rights Koh, is actually Irish American". And then years later, uh, we were writing an amicus brief in Lawrence versus Texas, which was whether, sodomy laws are, criminalization of sodomy is a violation of privacy and equality. And so we wanted to cite cases from the European Court of Human Rights, particularly Dudgeon, Bert knows very well. And so we asked Mary Robinson if she would be the lead plaintiff. And it turned out that as a lawyer in Ireland, she had actually represented, gay plaintiffs in this case. And so she happily agreed to do it. And it was the very first case in which the U. S. Supreme Court ever cited the European Court of Human Rights. So, so, you know, it goes from, Ballyhaunis to Korea, to the European Court of Human Rights, to the U. S. Supreme Court.

BERT LOCKWOOD 48:37

t was Kevin Boyle's case.

HAROLD KOH 48:39

Yes, exactly.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 48:40

That was Kevin, that was Kevin. well,I'm going to sidebar quickly to share our connection to England. And then I want to talk about your mom's,retirement this year and her incredible fellowship. but dad, do you want to share our connection to England from Mary Robinson to Kevin Boyle?

BERT LOCKWOOD 49:00

uh, Kevin was a, a dear friend who, um, when, he was going uh, establish um, human rights program at Galway, came to Cincinnati with the president Galway. And their idea was, that they would be able to raise money within the United States to fund this new human rights center that they wanted to create at Galway. And so we helped them get it incorporated, so that people could give Tax-free money,to this in, in, in the U. S., and so they spent a couple years doing this. And what they discovered was that, the Irish in America are, Irish on March 17th,and it doesn't extend much beyond that. And so they were, were quite unsuccessful in being able to, raise money, uh, for that, endeavor. uh, Kevin, um, you know, went on to, uh, Article 19 and then, one of the founders of the Human Rights Program at, and Essex along uh, another dear, friend of mine that goes back to NYU days of,uh , Nigel Rodley,

HAROLD KOH 50:21

Oh, what a great guy. What a great guy, Nigel.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 50:24

Yeah, we, we loved Nigel. We, we had the honor of having his wife, Lyn, on a podcast episode, as a tribute to Nigel, and his legacy. And we're going to Kevin's wife this summer. yeah, we, we miss him dearly. Um, and if I'm your family moved to England in 96 to 97. And Emily, you and your brother went to school

EMILY KOH 50:45

We

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 50:45

there.

EMILY KOH 50:46

did. Yeah, it was, was 96 to 97. I was in fifth grade. So from five, my brother was in kindergarten. We're four years apart. and we, we, yea, we had the opportunity to go there for a year while my dad was on sabbatical, from Yale law school. My mom had been, you know, wo that whole time, but also took a year off of work. And the four of us, rented out our house here in New Haven and moved to Oxford for a year and just had the most incredible experience. you know, my, my dad had studied at Oxford as a Marshall scholar in the seventies. Uh, and so had this personal affinity for Oxford, but was really looking for another chapter there. And it was one that we were able to write all together. Uh, we were living in, know, univer housing. So we were in this big house that had been divided into four different apartments, each for families that were visiting. my dad was affiliated with, with All Souls, College that year. We were on the very top floor. And then we went to a school, called gray coats at the time. which was just a, you know, 10 minute walk away from the school. And so every day we would get up, my brother and I, we would walk to school, with either my mom or my dad or both of us. and, you know, just really were able to build these incredible friendships that have lasted to this day. I mean, we, we are regularly in touch with, um, friends and the families of friends that we made there that year. which really shows that, you know, You can have these periods which in the grand scheme of your life are relatively short but are just extremely formative in that, it gave us an opportunity to be in a different country, to expand our networks, uh, to see what it's like to live life somewhere else, to benefit from each other's experiences and that, that deep connection, you know, we were resistant to it at the time because we were so young, immediately saw how special it was to be there, and that experience has really just continued to pay off over the years.

HAROLD KOH 53:00

just to take it back, six months before we I had a sabbatical coming I went to a human rights conference in there, and there was a guy there named Lord Lester, Anthony Lester, Lord Lester of Herne Hill, you're, you both know him, and, um, we were arguing, sort of, about the U. S. versus the European human rights system, and he was just killing me. Eve I'd say he would, uh,

and we sort of ended up in front of all these American judges arguing about this, I thought he really didn't like me, but also, it was very clear what a brilliant lawyer he was, and that he was really the leading, human rights lawyer uh, in England. And, um, at the end of it, he suddenly says to me, what can I do to help you? Uh, yo know, it was just like Rostow, you know, I, and, and I said, well, you know, in fact, I'm trying to, uh, go back to England on sabbatical, but I don't really know anybody there. And I had been there, but, you know, what you were saying about Kevin Boyle, you know, these are buildings, so it has to be the human networks. And so, uh, Anthony, pulled out all the stops, anyway, that's how I ended up back at Oxford in All Souls. And it turned out, of course, that love of America came from being an international student at Harvard with Mary Robinson, who was one of his best friends.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 54:28

Wow.

HAROLD KOH 54:29

Uh, and then, and then during the year that we were there, after years of Tory government, Tony Blair and the Labor Party came in, and Anthony, Lord Lester got, the British Human Rights Act through, which actually is the basis for, European human rights law being applied in the UK, which is sort of transnational legal process and action. And even after Brexit, it's still in, in place. uh, again, that shows this relationship between the human networks and networks of ideas. and now we're very close with his daughter, Maya Lester, who's a tremendous, uh, barrister, in London. um, so anyway, again, the power of the kind of networks that, you and Emily have created as friends, it just endures. And, um, it's a way, it's a transmission of values and transmission of ideas.

BERT LOCKWOOD 55:28

A story you may appreciate, Harold is, uh, Nigel, and Kevin, uh, contacted me when Mary Robinson Kevin to be, her, uh, chief assistant for her last year as, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. And they said they had decided Kevin couldn't do it unless, um, they could get me to come over and substitute for the two of them because Nigel was going on sabbatical. Um, and I said, well, I can't possibly do it for the full year, but I could do it for the spring semester and beyond. And, they said that, that would be great. Well, I had to, um, get the girls into, uh, school and this is before email. So we're becoming very frustrated because Brits are telling us that, we need to apply on this certain color green paper. Otherwise they won't accept the application, um, uh, or the thing. And it's just, and I so happened to uh, uh, at a, human rights meeting Bill Butler did, uh, once a year with the chief, h rights person in, in about 24 Western governments. And before the meeting was beginning, was the repertoire and I, I started up a conversation with the, young woman who uh, representing Ireland. And I said, you know, do you know Kevin Boyle, my friend, Kevin Boyle? And she said, no, but, I'm going to, meet him for lunch next week in Geneva. And I said, oh, you know, and I explained that I uh, going to be, um, uh, substituting for him, that I was having, uh, difficulty at the moment, uh, uh, getting my kids into school. And she said, oh, my brother's the, uh, principal of a Catholic in Colchester. and so, so, Meredith and her sister, uh, Courtney were treated like

royalty, at this, Catholic school,uh , and, and we, we lived in Kevin's house and it I , basically, almost walking distance the

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 57:44

We

BERT LOCKWOOD 57:44

school,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 57:44

couldn't

BERT LOCKWOOD 57:44

yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 57:44

have, we couldn't have been luckier. And, and I share the exact same sentiment you do, Emily, that , just having the honor and privilege of being, we lived in England in 94 and then 2002. so it was really exciting to be an eight-year-old and then going back. It was a 15 to 16 year old. I celebrated my 16th birthday in England, and truly like it planted a seed for me to want to move abroad on my own as an adult. but I, I just absolutely loved acclimating to a new culture. And, um, I remember my first day of school, my sister and I were together, and my brother was at college at the time. So he didn't come abroad with us. And I just remember looking at my sister because all of these kids were swarming us with questions as Americans. A they were asking us about hot dogs and the TV show friends and the TV show, the Simpsons. and I was like, we, they must think we're smarter than this, right? Like this is not what they're thinking. America like, please let them be more. but we ended up just having the most wonderful experience. Um, and I believe your family's the same. you still have dear friends over there that you go to visit and go to weddings it's just been such a wonderful united front. time. and yes, absolutely loved that entire Um, And, you know, it's just, i just a language we're fluent

EMILY KOH 59:00

we, we share

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 59:01

in. and I also wanted to make sure we do, uh, mention your mom's incredible fellowship wh is the Christy Fisher Legal Fellowship. Emily, I'll let you tell a little bit about your

EMILY KOH 59:11

Yeah. well , first, just to give you a sense of my mom as a person, I, you know, I think she's just one of the most decent human beings that you could ever imagine. and like my dad is a lawyer. And has really committed her life's work to legal services, here in Connecticut. my dad and my mom met in Washington, D. C., uh, actually close to where I, I live now. th were set up on a

blind date and, uh, the, the joke is when they were figuring out how they would recognize each other at the restaurant, my dad said, well, I'll be the Asian guy. And my mom said, well, I'm the redhead. And, uh, and so when they got there, it was, uh, they were able to find each other very fast. Uh, but, you know, they both practice law and my mom has practiced, you know, as a legal services attorney here in the, the New Haven area for over 25 years. Uh, then, she spent the last 11 years on top of uh, an organization that was very new when she first joined, which is, um, it's called the Connecticut. and it's the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center. And it's really built on this model, as a, it's a medical legal partnership, really looking at how to support our veterans, you know, in a comprehensive way, a holistic way to make sure, that they have the resources that they need after serving our country. And, you know, my mom has just always been very clear eyed about, what she cares about, how she wants to spend her time. And I have never heard her once complain about the work that she's done anywhere, which I find just extraordinary because all of us, at one time or another frustrated or wonder if we are spending our time the way that we want to. And, um, my mom has just never felt that way. She's always been so driven by the work that she's doing and the clients that she's and has really done this work, in such a compassionate and personal way. And has, you know, over the course of her career just helped so many people, um, through the legal services that she's provided and has ensured, um, you know, th they have the legal representation that they need. But she decided towards the end of last year that, you know, after many decades of doing this work, she wanted to retire. She wanted to think about what else she could do with her time. And so she retired in February, 2025. And as a tribute to her, the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center set up this legal fellowship that is really designed, um, t support either second or third year law students who want to carry on the kind of work that CVLC does. Um, and to have the support that they need to do that and to do that in, in her honor. And, it really has just been incredible to see the way that the organization has recognized her Is, to see so many people step up and support this fellowship. and it's very meaningful to know that, you know, another generation of lawyers will be able to do this work and really carry on some of the that she helped establish at CVLC as a result of this fellowship.

HAROLD KOH 1:02:21

And I think one, you know, we call Christy a legal services attorney or a veterans attorney, but she's really a human rights attorney. And, you know, this is about breaking down barriers and leveling the playing field. And, Bert and I, you know, grew up reading Eleanor Roosevelt, who says, better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Which means that every day you get out there and do something to to make the world a little bit more equal. And then, you know, Rose, Eleanor Roosevelt also wrote, yo know, "human rights begins in the quiet places", you know, at the dinner table. And I think that that's what Emily was hearing growing up So, i fact, one story I have to tell was that Christy's retirement was a great event. But then after it was over, I said, how did everything go on your last day of work? And it turned out that her very last call was a client she had had for many years who was not getting the benefits that was hoping And she had found out at the very last minute that because of her work, they had gotten a medical ruling that would actually entitle him to an enormous capacity to access money that he was not going to get otherwise. But she couldn't tell him, but she couldn't tell him because of confidentiality. So she says to him, well, I'm retiring as of today. He really went

off on her. And her last conversation was him being very angry with her. and then we went on vacation. Then when she came back, the award was issued and he suddenly realized that all this work she had done for him, uh, was going to open the door to him finally being able to solve many of the problems in his life. when she finally, got a chance to tell him what happened, he thanked her profusely. um, I guess it was like night and day, you know?

BERT LOCKWOOD 1:04:19

Nevermind. Yeah.

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:04:20

Yes. Well, I mean, and you know, your mom's work with veterans, we're seeing veterans, the VA, their federal funding grants are being slashed. Now more than ever, must support our for our listeners, familiar on Spotify, Apple music, wherever you listen to your podcast, I include show notes and And I'll definitely make sure to link your mom's fellowship,

MEREDITH LOCKWOOD 1:04:44

Hey, listeners, We're going to hit pause here, but the conversation is far from over. Join us next time for part two.

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