

The Personal Story of Dr. Kyung Chul Kam (Chancellor, UAUT/UATC)

Part 4: The Calling

One of the external factors that played a favorable role in my business was the socio-economic climate of the times. In the 1970s, the fervor surrounding the construction of highways and industrial roads created an ideal environment for growth. As demand for outdoor billboard advertising increased, the scale of my business began to expand. I successfully secured advertising projects along major expressways such as the Gyeongbu (Seoul – Busan) and Gyeongin (Seoul – Incheon) highways.

This growth, however, had nothing to do with academic pedigree, regional ties, or personal connections. I did not graduate from one of the prestigious universities often referred to as “SKY” schools in Korea. Nor did I possess any influential networks. The rarity of my last name, Kam, meant I had few extended relatives to lean on. In truth, I started with nothing—no silver spoon—armed only with faith and passion. If there’s anything more I can credit, it’s my habit of approaching everything with a positive mindset and a fresh perspective. I often say to young people today: Don’t say something is impossible before you’ve even knocked properly on the door.

Since the days of the Old Testament, history has been shaped and transformed by those who dared to dream. When I first arrived in the city from a rural village with bare hands, I didn’t yet have faith, but I did have a grand dream—to succeed. As I studied, that dream became more concrete, and my confidence grew with it. Every time I imagined that dream becoming reality, my heart would beat with excitement.

In advertising—whether it’s outdoor signage or simple flyers—the first task is to capture people’s attention. And to do that, you must first understand people’s hearts. Simply following what the majority does will never put you ahead. Even the smallest thing requires your own insight and creativity. Some are born with creative talent, but for it to shine, consistent cultivation is required. One must not overlook or pass by the ordinary objects of daily life; rather, one should train the mind to imagine new uses for them beyond their original purpose.

What if, for example, we turned everyday inconveniences or inefficiencies into ideas for improvement? Even things that people see as useless burdens can be reborn into something new with just a bit of reimagining. When your thoughts begin to link one to another in this way, a limitless flow of business ideas can emerge. This is the beginning and the fertile ground of innovation. You don’t need to earn an MBA to master innovation. Ideas for innovation can arise anywhere in our daily lives, and anyone can act on them at any time.

In the chessboard of real life, we must learn from masters and develop the sensitivity to see one step ahead. Without it, we risk missing out on greater opportunities by chasing small, immediate gains. But if faith is added to this discernment, spiritual insight begins to develop, and we are able to see far greater things. In the end, the true secret to success in business is living with the great God as your spiritual mentor.

The Challenge Continues...

It took only about four to five years to revive the business after it had completely collapsed. Fortunately, I still had the rights to advertise along the road to Gimpo Airport, which became the seed money for my recovery. Then came the special boom brought by the Asian Games and the Seoul Olympics. Even during the bidding process, I experienced what could only be described as miraculous. To anyone watching, it was clearly nothing short of a miracle.

After the bankruptcy, there were still some unsold assets specifically, advertising structures along the Gyeongbu Expressway and the road leading to Gimpo Airport. These were prime locations, often considered golden spots for outdoor advertisements. Even after settling the aftermath of the bankruptcy, those structures remained intact. They became the foundation for my comeback.

More than anything, what truly gave me strength to rise again was the encouragement and support of those around me. Despite my young age, I had conducted my business with integrity and honor, always staying true to my word as the CEO. This became an invisible yet invaluable asset. Some people entrusted me with new projects simply because they believed I would make a comeback.

The 24th Olympic Games were held in Seoul in 1988. At the time, many found it hard to believe that our country could host such a global event. As part of the Olympic preparations, the government launched a competitive bidding process to select agencies for various business operations. To raise funds, they decided to allow advertising companies to participate through public tenders for billboard ads, electronic displays, neon signs, and more. The rights to exclusive installation and operation during the Olympic period were open for competition across the nation.

In order to participate, companies had to meet certain qualifications. I, too, was eager to join the bidding, but it wasn't easy given the lingering aftermath of the bankruptcy. So I decided to take a different approach. I established a new legal entity with a few business partners and formed a consortium under my leadership, focusing primarily on outdoor advertising along the national road network. Through this consortium, I entered the bidding process. *(To be continued ...)*