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Air Force past and future forge friendship

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By Kathie Bullard HarrisStaff writerThe bond between 2nd Lt. Kevin Jun and military veteran Elvin “Ed” Ward isn't apparent at first glance.

Spend some time with them, though, and it's clear they have formed a friendship that bridges a gulf of 50 years and different cultures.

Seated underneath the stained-glass windows of the quiet Fayetteville Veterans Affairs Medical Center chapel, the two couldn't seem more different.

Jun is 27, relaxed and trim in his Air Force uniform. His round-framed glasses make him look even younger.

Ward, a retired Air Force master sergeant, is 74 and spends his days in a wheelchair because of a service-related disability. Ward's eyes shine and a smile comes easily to his face, though his arms — decorated with old tattoos he now regrets — lie mostly limp on his lap.

Ward served in Korea. Jun was born there. Somehow, that overlap has helped forge a link between them.

Jun immigrated with his family from Seoul to Los Angeles when he was 11 years old. “We came for the reasons everyone does, for better education, a better life,” Jun said.

Jun chose to seek his education through the Air Force, enlisting after high school and working his way toward a bachelor's degree and a commission in seven years.

He first visited the VA hospital with fellow officers. But Jun kept coming back to see the veterans.

“These folks paved the way,” he said. “Young people are too self-absorbed and they forget the folks who made it possible.”

Norma Byrd, the volunteer services officer, said visitors aren't unusual, but the relationship that Ward and Jun have developed is.

“We have lots of military that come to visit,” she said, “but that they strike up such a bond and continue coming, it's uncommon.”

Ward and Jun talk about “anything and everything,” said Jun. That includes their memories of Korea.

As a young serviceman, Ward landed at Inchon in 1951. He spent time in Seoul, Jun's home city. At one point, Ward sought temporary shelter in a girl's college, EWha, that Jun remembers. When Jun spells it incorrectly, Ward corrects him and they both laugh.

“The one thing that drew me to him — we study the war and a specific battle and he was a part of that

battle,” said Jun. “He tells me about what happened.”

Though his time in the country was during grim circumstances, Ward fell in love with it. “Seoul was beautiful,” he said.

After meeting Jun, Ward has a new view of his time in Korea. “It gives me a feeling of almost helping him out personally,” said Ward.

“I could be living in North Korea if it weren't for him,” said Jun.

Jun's family is proud of his service in the U.S. military, and he takes his work seriously.

“This is something I feel strongly about,” he said. “I want to give back to my family, and I'm grateful for this nation.”

Jun also takes visiting the veterans seriously.

“I feel like it's important,” he said. “From what I hear, a lot of these folks are neglected by their families. I think of their sacrifices.”

Ward and his wife, Sue, have thanked Jun for his visits with a home-cooked meal. He went to their home several weeks ago for dinner.

“I think he ate two plates' worth,” said Sue.

“We've unofficially adopted him,” said Ward.

Together Ward and Jun share an Air Force heritage.

“I like finding out what is going on in the Air Force,” said Ward. “I really miss it.”

Jun said he is the present and Ward is the past.

“He's a living history book,” Jun said. “I'll do my best to carry that on.”

Kevin Jun

Age: 27

Rank: Second lieutenant

Job: Procurement officer

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Staff photo by Steve Aldridge

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