

## Facing fear in a foreign country

Posted by [Emily09](#) on 2/07/11 • Categorized as [Quality of Life](#)



Native Californians Emily Shapiro and Caitlin Fitzmaurice felt shock and fear in November 2010 when North Korea attacked an island off of South Korea, where they are working in Seoul as English teachers.



Tommy Kim, a Korean-American transplant, says South Korea has become somewhat accustomed to North Korea's tactics.

social studies class that I began to feel fear. We had been attacked. It was unreal. This same feeling washed over me as I watched the news of Yeonpyeong Island.

That whole day many scenarios played out in my head: bombs, total chaos, air raid sirens going off, and scenes

### By Emily Shapiro

"Hi Emily, did they bomb Seoul?" asked my sister with worry.

"No sister they did not," I answered.

"Well, on the news they said that an attack had happened," she informed me. And with that the rush of phone calls, Facebook messages, and emails came flooding in to see how I, on a one-year English teaching stint in Seoul, South Korea, was doing. While I did my best to soothe the anxieties of my friends and family, I wondered how the people of South Korea would deal with such tragedy.

In the United States an attack is a big deal. The entire country stops to mourn and recover, just like we did after the Oklahoma City bombing, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and most recently the assassination attempt on Rep.

Gabrielle Giffords that took six lives in Arizona. Unlike some of these instances, however, on the day of the November attack by North Korea on Yeonpyeong *Island* there didn't seem to be much reaction in Seoul.

I headed to my favorite convenience store. As I waited for my purchases I directed my gaze toward the TV screen which showed burning buildings and plumes of smoke rising from an island. I immediately had a flashback to 9/11.

At that time I had been 16, and had impatiently jabbed the radio buttons as I tried to find a station with some music. I was late for school and was taking the back roads. Just before I turned off the radio I heard a few words: plane, building, New York City. I figured a pilot had crashed in fog.

It wasn't until I got to school and watched the television footage in my

### More in 'Quality of Life'

- The search for a cure: Juvenile diabetes
- Cancer survivors share stories at Relay for Life
- As Valley Fever cases spike, vaccine is still elusive
- Individual needed to help 'Keep Bakersfield Beautiful'

### Login

Username:

Password:

Remember me

Login »

- Register
- Lost your password?

### Recent Comments

- Chumash traditions | [Zimicort on](#) Center of the World Festival will feature Chumash traditions and playwright contest
- Try movies and game shops for low-cost summer fun | [Bakersfield ... | omilukacobi on](#) Try movies and game shops for low-cost summer fun
- [Lynda on](#) The search for a cure: Juvenile diabetes
- [beckyv on](#) The search for a cure: Juvenile diabetes
- [Zaragoza Torch on](#) Cancer survivors share stories at Relay for Life

### Popular Topics

art arts Arts Council of Kern  
**Bakersfield** Bakersfield Museum  
of Art community service concert **cooking**  
CSUB **culture** downtown Bakersfield  
eating economy **education**  
entertainment events exhibit **farmers'**  
**market food** fresh fresh food fruit  
fundraiser gardening **health** health care

from movies like "Pearl Harbor." However, my inner self told me to get a grip. It was unfathomable that war would break out. I also began to feel a bit guilty, for while I could always leave, my students and co-teachers could not.

Is this how visitors and ex-patriots in Egypt have been feeling over the past two weeks as the world has watched protests explode in Cairo calling for the resignation of the ruling government?

Native Koreans seemed so nonchalant about the attacks when, to outsiders, the threat seemed serious and immediate. How does one continue with the day-to-day when tomorrow is so uncertain? I decided to ask some of my new friends in Seoul for their thoughts.

"Actually I don't think about North Korea much, but sometimes I get scared of breaking war," said Kim Seunghye, or Elly, my Korean co-teacher.

My friend and fellow writer Tommy Kim, a Korean-American transplant who moved to America when he was seven years old, explained it to me this way. "I would say that the worldwide press was actually much more concerned about the situation than the average person living in Korea. People here have become accustomed to North Korea's actions to a large extent. Obviously, what happened in Yeonpyeong was terrible, but I think people living in Seoul viewed it the way a person in L.A. might view a big fire that happens in Miami, i.e. concerned, but not personally involved."

According to Tommy Kim, North Korea has a "Crying Wolf" syndrome, in that it is hard to take their threats seriously.

I was still not convinced. Apparently I wasn't alone in my misgivings and concerns. During that day my co-workers and I were feeling a host of different emotions.

"I was at work and I felt shocked and confused. I wasn't sure quite how to respond or what to do," said Caitlin Fitzmaurice of Orinda, Calif. who had recently received her teaching certificate in Spain.

Another co-worker who had yet to come to Korea explained her misgivings.

"I felt so overwhelmed with mixed emotions of what I should do in terms of go or stay. I had just quit both my jobs and I was literally hopping on a plane in two days to come teach in South Korea. I figured I would speak to a couple of people over there and get their opinion on the whole situation," said Sonia Mcinerny of Toronto, Canada.

I felt relieved that others were as concerned as I was, and the general work atmosphere remained the same. Not one of my students talked about the attacks, nor were there any meetings to address any issues that we might have. In essence it was just another day, except that part of their country just happened to have been attacked.

During that week, I remained very tense. I searched Internet media outlets for any headlines about the Koreas, and checked the embassy website daily for warnings to leave. I even memorized the location of the embassy in case of an emergency. I slipped into a state of fear.

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," said Franklin D. Roosevelt. Looking back, I am a bit ashamed for feeling so cowardly.

Instead of challenging the threat, I hid like a scared kid in my apartment thinking that it would be the safest place to be. After a weekend of watching movies and YouTube videos, I decided enough was enough.

The weekends are my exploration time, and even though I had seen some things, around the city, I hadn't crossed off everything on my list yet. For instance, there was the city bus tour, and, with reservation needed ahead of time, a temple stay in which you can live with a sect of Buddhist Monks for a weekend.

Before the attacks I had felt relatively safe. Dealing with the local adjamas, older Korean women, and the occasional inebriated men, was a pain, but I had no qualms about going into the city at night. In fact, except for the attacks, the country as a whole is relatively safe.

"Murders are quite rare in South Korea, to the point where they're considered huge, shocking news stories whenever they do occur," Tommy Kim told me. "When I was living in Los Angeles, the daily news would have so many stories about people being killed that I just stopped registering them after a while. In Korea, you may run into the occasional jerk that has a chip on the shoulder against foreigners or random strangers wanting to practice their English with you, but acts of violence are extremely uncommon."

Fitzmaurice agreed. "Seoul seems very safe. Especially compared to a city like Barcelona, it seems there is no petty crime. I haven't witnessed any pick-pocketing and it feels safe to walk alone at night."

My period of uncertainty was over. With my trusty travel book and subway card in hand, I ventured into the night.

*Emily Shapiro is a 2009 CSUB graduate who majored in communications with emphases in journalism and public relations. She is working as an English teacher in Seoul, South Korea. Read her [first six stories here](#).*

**Tagged as:** attacks, CSUB, Egypt, Emily Shapiro, English, fear, foreign country, national security, North Korea, safety, Seoul, South Korea, teaching, travel

health care reform healthy eating In Season  
Now Kern County locally grown Michelle  
Beck music news nonprofits organic  
performance produce Quality of Life  
recipes seasonal produce theater  
things to do vegetables  
volunteering

---

Follow Us

Bakersfield Express on   
Bakersfield Express on 

---

---

### Trackbacks

---

1. [Tweets that mention Facing fear in a foreign country | Bakersfield Express – Topsy.com](#)

---

---

### Leave a Response

---

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.