

BIRCH WATHEN LENOX STUDENT PROFILE



JW Lee '17

The three years JW Lee spent at Birch Wathen Lenox provided him with tools to explore his deeply-held twin interests: storytelling and Christianity.

Current college/university:

USC graduate program (NYU undergrad)

Academic concentration/major:

Film

Academic/professional plans:

Filmmaking

A Natural Storyteller and A Man of Faith

FROM SOUTH KOREA TO BIRCH WATHEN LENOX

In his three years at Birch Wathen Lenox, Jang Woo “JW” Lee left an indelible mark on the community. Having lived in South Korea for most of his life, JW entered BWL as a sophomore. While it was a huge transition — “obviously moving into a new school is very nerve-racking,” he says — he immediately found school offerings to get excited about. “I think the effects of moving quickly between Korea and America probably made me unsure of where my identity is. It’s a difficult thing.” But, “there were some really cool things. You could order lunch from the student lounge, that was really cool. I think I adjusted to the school pretty quickly.” It certainly helped that JW was already immersed in America culture, noting an affinity for Sesame Street as a child (“I learned English unintentionally through watching a lot of VHS tapes when I was little,”) as well as classic Hollywood movies (“a lot of Chaplin and that sort of thing.”)

JW’s interest in American culture — and specifically American drama — was a foundational reason for his move to New York, and BWL in particular. “For the most part — I think that’s another reason I came to New York — I felt like I could express myself a bit easier. Somebody from Birch would recommend a poetry reading, and I would showcase my acting. People actually read what I wrote. We had school publications.” The dedication that BWL shows to fostering student passion was on full display in JW’s BWL career.

JW became heavily and immediately involved in BWL’s drama program. “I did six shows. I did the play and the musical each year I was there, plus a lot of in-class skits and readings. I hadn’t really done musicals before. It was really fun to try out different things every night.” In particular, he speaks fondly of his turn as Mr. Twimble in the musical *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. “It was a short scene. I realized I do better as a character actor. I give my strongest performances when I have a condensed role I can really focus on. I would watch and listen to all the different versions.” JW’s ability to seamlessly engage with BWL’s performing arts program was aided by the school’s size and character. The school’s motto is a “small school with big opportunities,” and those students avid for an activity can be easily included.

Beyond his involvement in theater, JW cemented a unique role among his peers: Bible Answer Man. JW is a devout Christian, and he brought his faith with him into BWL. He often spoke out against the excesses of party culture, and with sensitivity to differing opinions, became a resource for students to discuss questions around



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religion and spirituality while maintaining and strengthening his own convictions. “I’m used to being in an environment with people of all types of worldviews,” he says. “I see one of my job descriptions as an evangelist. I felt like it was an opportunity. I knew that people had questions. I was known as the guy you could talk about things with. There are a lot of assumptions about Christianity that aren’t very positive. For me, it was mostly about how do I stay faithful.”

JW’s singular persona within the BWL student body is something he looks back on with both pride and self-reflection. He referred to BWL as “a nice little ecosystem” and continuously asked “did I help people enough?”

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WHERE DRAMA MEETS CHRISTIANITY: EXPLORING FOUNDATIONAL PASSIONS

For JW, his love of drama and Christianity are inextricably linked. “I came to faith through a play. I think they were closely coincided. I grew up in a Christian household, and my father was a famous TV producer in Korea, and I just love stories — telling stories and acting them out.” At BWL, JW was given the support and encouragement he needed to deepen his understanding of drama and hone his skills towards that mission. He points in particular to Ms. Freilicher, drama teacher and Director of Performing Arts: “She had tremendous faith and support. I had my first directing class with her. I liked how much trust she had in me playing specific roles that were good for me. She’s just an awesome person.”

The drama program — a place where JW could be himself freely and openly — was also where he formed his closest ties among his fellow students. “I had so much fun. A lot of my closest friendships [came out of drama at Birch]. For a long time, I was struggling a lot with how do I integrate my faith with my art. Some of my most fun times were at rehearsal — trying out different jokes and making people laugh. I think it made me more confident.”

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BWL FACULTY AND STAFF SUPPORT AND CHALLENGE STUDENTS

When speaking of the faculty and staff, JW lists many of its members as instrumental to his growth in his time at Birch Wathen Lenox. Some challenged him by engaging with his faith. Others by pushing him academically. Others still he developed close friendships with. In many cases, all of the

above. He recalls an impactful project assigned to him by English teacher Ms. Garbus. “I think where I was most vocal about [Christianity] was in my writing classes. With Ms. Garbus — we read Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* — [she asked me to] make a lecture about the biblical *Song of Solomon* and connect that to the book. It was some of the best bible studying I ever did.” JW also remembers well the academic rigor he found at BWL, especially in Dr. Jones’ class. “His course was tougher than anything I took in college. This school is building up stamina. I had to stretch my reading muscles. He prepped us really well for the AP U.S. History test. He was a really supportive guy. Every time he gave an encouragement, it meant so much.”

When it came to college admissions, JW admits he had a hard time. “My mental health was jeopardized. The anxiety added to other anxieties — it just became difficult to navigate.” But JW credits BWL with doing great work to guide him through the daunting process. “I think [former BWL counselor] Mr. Battaglia and everyone were very supportive in our journey. The teachers were gracious and willing to write recommendations, and there were a lot of people who helped me out. They would ask if I was doing okay. I was right next to Mr. Battaglia when I found out I got into NYU, and they were all really happy for me.”

Now in his first year at a graduate program in Film at USC, JW looks back warmly on his relationships with teachers, nurses, and janitors alike, and the enduring impact of those relationships. “I’ve been back a handful of times. I still talk with some of the teachers.” JW recalls the yearbook inscriptions left by both [Upper School Co-Director] Mr. March and Mr. Battaglia. “What they wrote was really kind. I still think about it sometimes.”

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IN HIS TEACHER’S WORDS

“Working with JW always brought a smile to my face. He was so passionate about everything he worked on and loved bringing fresh, creative, intelligent, and even wildly quirky ideas to the table. He was uninhibited on the stage and always inspired others to be unafraid, try something new, and not be self-conscious. His dedication and enthusiasm for the arts were infectious, and this passion has carried over to his beautiful, thoughtful, and artistic work as a filmmaker and writer.”

— Ms. Freilicher, drama teacher and
Director of Performing Arts