Auto suppliers offer cultural blend to area

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Flags representing the United States of America, South Korea, Alabama and Mando fly in front of one of Mando's buildings in Opelika.

With major automobile manufacturing plants nearby, like Hyundai's plant in Montgomery and Kia's in West Point, the East Alabama area has become a hotbed for automotive suppliers.

Suppliers like Hanwha L&C Alabama, Daewon America and Mando America have opened and enjoyed success in Opelika, bringing not only a range of employment opportunities with them, but an overseas influence to the Deep South as well. They're all Korean-based with Opelika locations — and representatives from each say they have gone through unique learning experiences since being incorporated.

"To us, we're trying to operate as one team," Dennis Kirkland, human resources Manager at Hanwha L&C Alabama, said. "Instead of having an atmosphere where you have two distinct cultures, we're trying to merge those together, and harness the leverages of both cultures.

"Each culture is distinct, but if they learn a little bit about the American culture, and we learn a little about the Korean culture, we have the opportunity to synergize there."

Allen Brown of Daewon America said his company has experienced more of the same, as Korean executives and local workers continue to work alongside each other and move forward together.

"We're still trying to bridge the communication gap and the culture gap," Brown said. "Each supplier, as well as Hyundai and Kia, are trying to bridge that gap I know.

"It's an everyday process."

Representatives from Daewon, Hanwha, and Mando each said the Korean-based companies are invested in the Southeast and in East Alabama — and that each is looking forward to continuing to operate and create jobs in the area.

"It's a good location between the Hyundai facility and the Kia facility," Brown said. "We've had good resources to pull from. The city of Opelika has been very good to us and work with us really well."

While some Korean workers are dispatched to area locations for just a few years, others move to the area permanently — and all of them bring with them the opportunity for learning experiences for them and their American co-workers.

"We do have different individuals, depending on the skills that we may need," Kim Gradic, human resources Manager at Mando America, said. "For instance, we may need someone who is a specialist on a certain type of machine they have in Korea. They may send an engineer over for a couple of years.

"I think we have a nice cultural blend here. We have more than just Korean and American here. We have many, many cultures. The different ways that individuals think about problems or approach problems and the different skills and abilities that they bring with them, certainly is an advantage for an organization."

Each company has had their own way of helping employees reach out to understand and connect with Korean and Korean-American co-workers. At Hanwha, Kirkland says the company has partnered with Auburn University to bring a weekly program to the company after local employees expressed an interest in Korean culture.

"Auburn has what they call the King Sejong Institute," Kirkland said. "They have a fantastic young lady who comes out here every week for an hour and a half, and she teaches us Korean language and culture."

With the supplier industry continuing to find success in East Alabama, the seemingly unlikely bridge between Southern and Korean cultures will continue to build on its foundation — and that connection between the two will only continue to grow deeper and closer to home.