

Author shines spotlight on human rights abuses

BEING HELD IN AN underground cell, starved, tortured and brainwashed sounds like a scene from yet another young adult dystopian fantasy novel. But for North Korean prison camp escapee Shin Dong-hyuk, these and other heinous situations were “home” for more than 20 years.

Collin College’s 2015 Book in Common selection, *Escape From Camp 14: One Man’s Remarkable Odyssey From North Korea to Freedom in the West*, tells the story of Dong-hyuk as he is born in a North Korean prison camp to prisoners and eventually escapes, the first-ever North Korean prisoner to do so. The book’s author, Blaine Harden, first met Dong-hyuk when he wrote an article for *The Washington Post* about the horrors suffered in the prison camp.

“After that story was published, it got an incredible reaction,” Harden said. “People from all over the world sent me emails asking how they could help. I realized that this was the story I was looking for that could give a fresh, detailed human face to the totalitarianism in North Korea.”

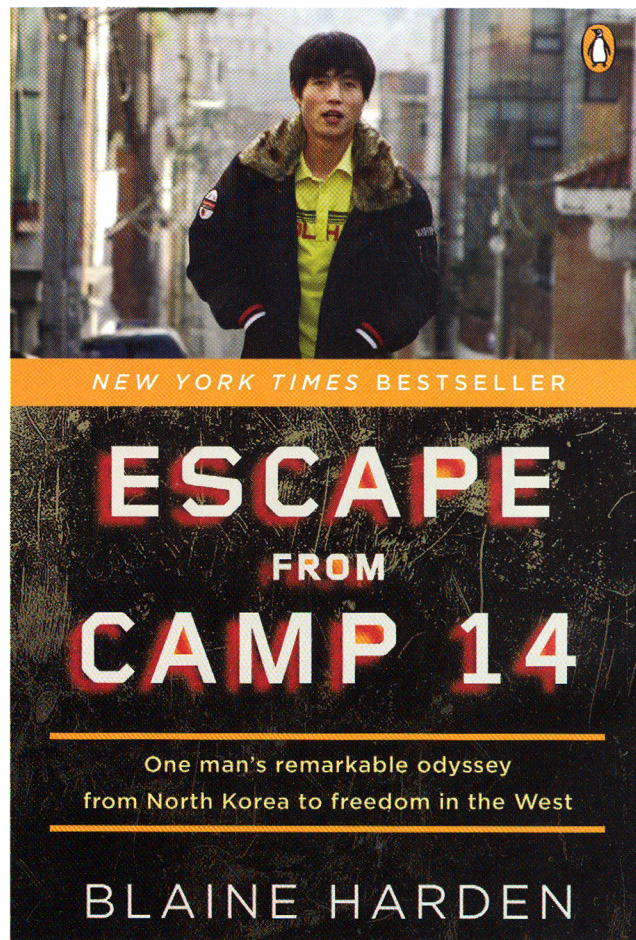
Despite the massive public interest, getting Dong-hyuk to open up proved difficult. When Harden first approached Dong-hyuk about a book, he was turned down. Only after other human rights activists encouraged him did Dong-hyuk reluctantly agree to interviews.

“With the first interview, he looked at me like I was going to perform surgery without anesthetic,” Harden recalled. “It took a very long time. We had about 20 interviews before he started opening up.”

Some of the most gut-wrenching parts of Dong-hyuk’s story include being tortured by fire, and he still has the burn scars on his lower back to prove it. He was also pierced with a steel hook and had a fingertip chopped off. In addition to the physical tortures, Dong-hyuk was brainwashed and didn’t have a sense of morality. He reported his mother for an infraction and as a result she was executed. He felt no remorse at the time, Harden said.

“He had been raised to be a collaborator and he knew nothing better,” Harden explained. “The guilt came later when he realized what he had done. He’s had to learn how to be a human being. Since then, he has really made a tremendous amount of progress in integrating ethics into his own sense of who he should be.”

Dong-hyuk was able to escape from prison camp and fled to China. He lived in South Korea for a time before coming to the




United States and marrying. He testified before the United Nations, as a major part of the U.N.’s first commission of inquiry into human rights abuses of North Korea.

“His story marks the first time that human rights in North Korea rose to that level at the U.N.,” Harden said. “His story was the thing that got everybody to pay attention. And since then, the U.S. government has changed its policy making it explicitly clear that human rights are as important in dealing with North Korea as nuclear weapons or long-range missiles.”

Escape From Camp 14 has become a *New York Times* bestseller and has been published in 27 different languages. Harden said he hopes people come away with the understanding of the extraordinary power of bad government.

“The main message is that bad government can ruin people’s lives, and people should pay attention to how their government works,” Harden explained. “Ask questions such as who is in government? Is it fair? Shin’s story is an example of the worst government in the world and the worst things it can do.”

For more information about the Collin College Book in Common program, visit <http://www.collin.edu/academics/bookincommon>. 

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