Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Soojin Yoon. I am honored to be here with you and happy to share my story today as the recipient of the 2009 Rep. Tom Lantos International Studies Scholarship.

First, I want to tell you a little about my background.

You all probably appreciate that it is difficult to live life according to a plan. Something unexpected always happens, and this unexpected “change” can influence a life decision in the future. My father was an architectural engineer, and my family had numerous opportunities to accompany him to several countries over the years. I was exposed to various cultures and different regions during my childhood. At that time, free travel was not common in South Korea. Exposure to new areas such as New Guinea, Guam, Australia, the U.S., and Saudi Arabia was an unexpected change for my family. This experience sparked my interest in fashion. I observed how fashion both manifests the different aspects of each region, society and culture, but also reflects a global point of view which transcends those differences. This observation underlies my passion for the business of fashion.

After my studies in Seoul, Korea, where I specialized in Clothing & Textiles, I worked as a fashion merchandiser for 5 years. The fashion industry has always been a unique field to me because it combines art and business. I took several business trips to Japan, Italy, France and England to conduct market research and to participate in textile shows, where I selected the fabrics to be imported into Korea. At that time, I was not yet involved in international business; I only visited those foreign markets to procure fabrics for local Korea manufacturers.
But five years ago, I moved to New York city with my family. By a recommendation from a friend at FIT, I took several courses as a part-time student, and in the meantime I received an internship offer for a textile wholesale importer position. Both these experiences brought me to the international business side. They opened my eyes to the importance of international business, and both led me to pursue a major in the International Trade and Marketing as a full-time student at the Fashion Institute of Technology. So here I am.

Second, I would like to let you know that Representative Tom Lantos is an inspiration to me.

Tom Lantos was a distinguished U.S. Congress Representative from 1981 until his passing earlier this year, in February 2008. Born in Budapest, Hungary, he moved to the United States in 1947, and received his Ph.D in economics in 1953. Early in his career, he was a professor of economics, an analyst on international affairs, and advisor to U.S. senators. He became Chairman of the United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs and a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. He was a vocal speaker on issues undertaken by U.S. Congress’ International Relations Committee. He passionately championed human rights. He spoke out and fought for many minorities and tried to protect religious freedom. Also, he was a well-known outspoken advocate of the environment, receiving consistently high ratings from the League of Conservation Voters and other environmental organizations. Tom Lantos was a man of sincere moral conviction and is now missed for his vigorous defense of human rights, and for his commitment of devoted service to his adopted nation, the U.S. Last June, President George W. Bush posthumously awarded him “the Medal of Freedom” in honor of his leadership and numerous humanitarian activities.

While I did not know Congressman Lantos personally, I had the pleasure of getting to know him in the course of applying for this scholarship program. In many ways, I feel connected to him.
He made efforts to protect international security by visiting North Korea with the goal of establishing a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. Resolving this nuclear issue was one of his humanitarian activities. His efforts reflect not only his interest to promote international security, but also his concern for the North Korean people and his desire to protect them as a minority within the world community.

He reminds me of the current Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kimoon Ban. He is a Korean, who is serving as an ambassador of this non-governmental organization that deals with international affairs, human rights, security, economic & social development, and international law. Both Rep. Lantos and the Secretary-General Ban exhibit a similar willingness to learn. Both applied their learning to themselves, and obtained powerful positions to serve their devotion. Surprisingly, during my interview for this scholarship, I learned that I am not the only person who admires both of these gentlemen. Pointing to the pictures of himself with Rep. Lantos and the Secretary General Ban, Mr. Friedman told me that he also shares my admiration.

Personally, I believe that the fashion industry is a good means through we can approach closed countries such as North Korea or other countries whose people are really suffering from poverty. I thought, if we can increase international trade in the fashion industry with these countries, it is possible to help their people and enhance their living standards. It might also accelerate the openness of the society. I was very happy to learn that Rep. Lantos also was very interested in the international aspects of the fashion industry and a regular participant in CGS’s International User Conference.

At Handsome Corporation, the last company I worked for in Korea, I had many valuable experiences and learned a lot as a senior merchandiser. Since its establishment, Handsome has been an unrivaled and innovative leading company in its market. I was curious about the company’s strategies for success and wanted to learn from it. I had a special experience related to computer systems used in fashion. Traditionally, fashion has been a labor intensive industry. However, the CEO of Handsome
invested considerably in the development of a specialized computer system connecting the company with retailers and distribution centers together in real-time. This system enabled easy central control and facilitated efficiency. Also, Handsome always tried to upgrade the system so that even when an entry level staff suggested an idea or requested a program which could foster the efficiency of their daily tasks, the company would not hesitate to develop the initiative. This attitude and the fact that it had its own big computer department demonstrated its efforts to save time and focus on creative tasks. This system stimulated competitors, but it could not be easily duplicated because Handsome spent quite a lot of time and money to develop and utilize it. As a result, while other companies slowed down, Handsome increased its sales despite the financial crisis during the late 1990’s in Korea.

Like Rep. Lantos, I would like to further my studies to gain deeper insight and a broader vision for international business by learning practical issues and pursuing a career in global marketing.

Last semester I took “International Business & Fashion Law”, which was one of my major courses. This course helped me further familiarize myself with the intellectual property rights that I would like to connect to global marketing.

With increasing globalization, many countries are re-examining and strengthening their intellectual property laws. Yet, in the fashion industry, I have learned that it is not a well-established practice due to the relatively low awareness of this issue and the necessity to strengthen legislation on it. Intellectual property rights are an important global issue for promoting creativity and artistic autonomy. I would like to participate in the efforts to develop and strengthen these rights and promote the nurturing of creative activities in the fashion industry. When I become an international marketing specialist armed with this knowledge and goal, I will be able to contribute to socially responsible practices in the fashion industry and build a bridge between the industry with people and society.
Since I have been exposed to various ethnicities and cultures, I have always been interested in cultural diversity. Many activities of the Culinary Arts Club at FIT have enabled me to get better acquainted with students from other parts of the world by learning about their food, culture, tradition and, sometimes, religion. This aspect is helpful to making my role as an international marketing specialist more significant as I am learning to develop healthy relationships with people from different backgrounds. Because I am sensitive to the role that understanding different cultures plays in developing meaningful international connections, I have a genuine interest in bridging gaps in international business and cultural issues. I believe that this principle is one that Congressman Lantos represented. Tolerance and openness to differences counts for everything!

I always love to learn new things, and currently I am really enjoying my learning at the department of ITM far more than my previous programs. I am building a solid academic background to complement my previous work experience. In the future, like Congressman Lantos and many faculty members at FIT, I would like to stand in front of students at a college to share my knowledge and experience acquired in the U.S. and be helpful to them as they begin to fulfill their dreams. I want to teach and share experiences that cannot be acquired through books alone, and something that will connect to students’ realities and futures.

I enjoy reading biographies on anyone successful because I am most interested in their personality and what makes them unique. I am indeed very inspired by Rep. Lantos. I believe that now that I have come to know him, and he will be my esteemed lifetime model.

I would like to thank CGS, most especially Mr. Phil Friedman, President and CEO, and Mr. Paul Magel, Senior Vice President and ITM advisory board member, for granting this special learning opportunity through the 2009 Rep. Tom Lantos International Studies Scholarship.

Thank you so much.