

# **RECOGNITION OF EXCELLENCE**

**The Awakening of the Korean-American Community**

**- Sophia Lopez -**

Los Angeles is one of the most diverse cities in the world and as a result it swelters with discrimination against different economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This is what prompted the Los Angeles Riots to take place in 1992. The residents of the city were upset by the tensions between different classes and races, and the Rodney King verdict kindled the anger in the members of the South Central community. The riots instituted a lot of negative and positive change in Los Angeles especially within the Latino, Black, and Korean communities. Some of these communities, such as the Korean community, have re-built themselves and have been more active socially, politically, and economically to this day.

Prior to the riots, these communities were weak in many different ways. Economically, Los Angeles's labor market was said to have been "experiencing one of the most severe recessions of the post war era" by the California Economic Development Department. Between April 1991 and April 1992, 108,000 local jobs had disappeared from the economic job picture. "Black and Latino communities were hard hit, with a combined 29.7 percent in poverty and more than 13 percent unemployed" (LA Weekly) Most of the members of the Korean community in this area were immigrants. The majority of these immigrants opened small shops or restaurants in poor neighborhoods where they could afford the rent and make a living however, business wasn't very promising.

Socially, Los Angeles was also in the midst of an era of heavy street violence because of activity by armed gang members and drug dealers. This resulted in an increase of crime and murders in Los Angeles. Many residents even felt unsafe walking in the street during the afternoon because that was when there were many angsty armed teenagers released from school. There was also a lot of built up tension between the Korean community and the Black and Latino

community as a result of events after the Rodney King beating. Because of cultural differences and language barriers, the Korean community as well as the Latino community felt isolated. At this time these communities weren't very involved politically and weren't getting enough representation.

The riots initially began when the Rodney King Verdict was released and the officers were found not guilty. On this day a crowd of 300 people marched to the Los Angeles Courthouse protesting the verdict. This was only the beginning. Later that day, in the intersection of Florence and Normandie, a white truck driver, Reginald Denny, was attacked by a mob of local black residents. Shortly after, Fidel Lopez, a Guatemalan immigrant was attacked at the same place. One event that greatly affected the Korean community was when Korean storekeeper, Soon Ja Du, shot Latasha Harlins, a black ninth grader, after arguing about whether or not she stole from the store. Soon Ja Du wasn't sentenced to any prison time and was put on probation. This fueled a lot of anger and tension toward the growing community especially from the black community. As a result the Korean community was chiefly targeted during the riots. Small Korean businesses were the primary targets for looting, theft, fires, and property destruction. Because of all the mayhem, the Koreans began to purchase weapons in preparation for future crimes and were warned to close their businesses beforehand. One business owner, Richard Rhee, guarded his shop with nearly 20 other armed employees.

The riots really motivated change throughout the Korean community. The Korean community remembers these events as Sa-I-Gu, meaning four two nine. As a result from the riots the members of the community now consider themselves as Korean-Americans. Because of the marches and protest for equality and for pride, the Korean community in Los Angeles has become more well-known. These marches created new forms of leadership and motivated second

generation Koreans to represent and speak on behalf of the community. To contribute to a safer community, many programs and organizations were built like the Korean American Coalition. These programs and recreational centers help teach kids and keep them from being on the streets and taking part in unhealthy activities.

Korean-Americans also began to shift economically and politically. More than 40 percent of the residents were trying to move out seeing that they weren't experiencing the "American Dream". Initially Korean business owners thought they would become more isolated after white business owners moved their business out but instead this gave way for Korea-town's geographic expansion and led the community to reach out with the Latino community. There were also changes in occupational goals from small business owners to political leaders.

To this day many activist are trying to represent this community to help it become more politically active and more preferable to the residents. For example, Grace Yoo ran for Los Angeles City Council District 10 to act towards different problems the district faces. Because Grace Yoo is a Korean woman, being elected would abridge the Korean-Americans with the politics and problems relating to their community. The Korean community has already come so far and has endured a lot of reformation. Not only has it grown geographically and culturally it has inspired younger generation to branch out and become more active. In the future the community hopes to see more reformation take place to make these residents more comfortable and to benefit them as well as have more leaders benefiting the community.

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