

OUTSTANDING ACHEIVEMENT

LA Riots: Pursuing Justice

- Jamie Chung -

The clouds pushed each other around in the sky. South LA began to burn, and the smell of smoke tattled on the delinquent. It was the day after the four white LAPD officers were acquitted of beating Rodney King and the riots happened quickly.

Word got out that Mr. Kim's liquor store went up in flames just a couple blocks down our store. My team of ten rushed outside of the market and barricaded the whole entire parking lot in order to prevent anyone from entering. One after another, the market's shopping carts were turned over and all of the merchandise pallets were pushed forth to construct a fence that would safeguard both the market and the staff from the raucous gunshots. Business was closed in the meantime. With a crew of ten people, which usually rounded up to about eighty, my men and I stood armed, each of us taking shelter behind a pallet.

This is the picture I painted in my head as I stepped into my father's shoes, who at the time was twenty-five years old. He was working as the general manager at Han Nam Market, which is located on Olympic and New Hampshire Ave to this day. Dad was enthusiastic and passionate to take on a responsible job at a young age, never to know that he would one day encounter such an event.

Heeding E.H. Carr's words in that history is a "dialogue between the present and the past", I first approached my father, who immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 15. While we were waiting for our food to arrive in a neighborhood Korean restaurant, I asked my dad if he knew of the LA Riots of 1992. My father sat up straight in his seat, eager to share some of his past life experiences with his daughter. His story straightaway presented me with two clear-cut insights. Other than the insight I was able to gain from my father's own past, I was able to firstly and genuinely understand why the Korean community got so tight over the past decade.

Los Angeles in the year of 1992 until today has the nation's largest Korean-American community. At the time, when the verdict of the videotaped fatal shooting, by Korean grocer Soon Ja Du, of a 15-year-old black girl, Latasha Harlins, declined Soon's sentence to prison, the developing Koreatown enclave became the focus of black resentment. Mysterious black groups led boycotts of Korean shops, looting, firing, and lighting the stores on fire. Korean storeowners came to defend their stores and faced gun battles with rioters, without the presence of any police or National Guard at the time. The whole community was torn apart and racial ills were prevalent in society. Family members and friends barricaded themselves; businesses closed down; people were hurt; everyone was bitter. The low social status of the Korean American population and our language barrier is a self-explanatory reason as to why the Korean community has come and grown together as one. The move forward has started and engaged many Korean American organizations, such as KAC, to ensure Korean-Americans had a voice at the table in future discussions, providing me with the ethnic-centric environment that has shaped the Korean-American I am today.

Not only will the LA Riots live on to be a reminder and urge for the Korean community to stay together as one, but they will also have the communities of Los Angeles work towards the theme of "getting along", as quoted from Rodney King's question pitched to the citizens of LA. King's situation gave the world a look into police brutality and cover-ups. Subsequently, the world witnessed the riots as a protest of racial inequality, which has helped to create a more diverse Los Angeles that has worked to extend a hand across cultures, and engage civically. In the near and far future, our community will continue to grow and the LA Riots will always serve as the basis or the stepping-stone to the communal growth.

My second insight from my dad's story was into the definition of the word, history. I realized that history, the events of the past that determine the present and take influence on the future, is mainly an interpretation of the past, for history is constantly delivered, changed, and "interpreted" by secondary sources. I was similarly able to broaden my knowledge of the Riots through secondary sources from my dad and from news articles that recorded the Riots of 1992, and was rather amazed by these subtle insights and recognitions of the role history plays in society. History is the spark for inspiration, change, and growth, helping the world and communities within to foster development.