

OUTSTANDING ACHEIVEMENT

Never Forget

- Lisa Kang -

As I passed the shabby homes in Koreatown on a Sunday morning, my dad suddenly questioned me, “Do you know what happened to Koreatown fifteen years ago?” I was speechless. He continued. “They were burnt down. We didn’t deserve that.”

That was the first time I ever heard my dad express his anger about the L.A Riots. I could see how quickly his calm demeanor changed- his thick eyebrows creased, dark brown eyes widened and chapped lips frowned. As he told me the awful stories, my face began to mirror his. I was shocked to hear that hundreds of Korean stores turned to ashes, American Dreams were shattered, and Korean owners carried guns to protect themselves. I could not sleep that night. All the questions that occupied my mind. How could this be? Why do Koreans have it the hard way? Are we the only unlucky ones?

The past is a scab. It takes time to heal and sometimes, leaves a scar that reminds us how, when and from where we got it. Sometimes, the past ignites an array of emotions. Other times, the past mirrors our actions and intentions. While many curse the past, I consider my past- feelings, mistakes, events - a motivation to change my previous behaviors and environment. Ultimately, we can never forget about our past but rather, use it as a tool to test our limits and regain what we had lost.

The L.A Riot marks an abiding event that hindered the Korean community. During this era, many families settled in America to start a new life. They sought the American Dream and parents hoped their children to thrive in America. On April 29, 1992, however, stores, “many of them owned by Korean immigrants, were torched in the violence that followed the acquittal of the four LAPD officers who beat Rodney King” (NPR). Immediately, Koreans responded by practicing a defensive way to protect themselves and their families. While many store-owners stood on the roof with a handgun, other families prepared to rally in order to end violence and

bring healing between Korean-American and African American communities. According to Edward T. Chang, a professor of ethnic studies at UC Riverside, claims that “Korean Americans learned the hard way that little would be done for them; they had to become politically active and empower themselves.” Their acknowledgment of their minority demonstrated a degree of boldness and quick judgment. Surely, they used what they already had- weapons, supporters, themselves- and implemented a safe zone.

One story that aches my heart is Kee Whan Ha’s. As the store-owner of Hannam Chain, Ha is one of many men to arm himself with a rifle. He, however, lost his security guard in the L.A Riots. Ha vividly remembers his security’s “head [was] off” and his body “has fallen down on the ground.” As I reflect upon Mr. Han’s powerful story, I could only imagine the fear and shock in Ha’s eyes to witness his friend’s dead body. Furthermore, I commend him for continuously battling and guarding his grounds despite how dangerous the situation was. His heroic actions have certainly demonstrated perseverance. As Ha waited an estimable amount of time for the police, Ha stayed calm and shot “in the air” to shy away rioters. His heroism permeates in L.A as he has proven that he will fight until the end.

Indeed, the L.A Riots has taught me and my community two things. First, there are benefits to overcoming hardships. Inevitably, L.A Riots is not the only event that marked a great suffering in our culture. We have dealt with famish and beatings during the invasion of Japan and Korean War. The condition was indeed much harsher during this period and only our grandparents and ancestors could attest to this. Apart from the cost, L.A Riot survivors have gained physical and mental strength, willpower and pride. Their stories motivate me and my peers to thrive and renovate our neighborhood, homes and businesses. In my Korean niche, I can only see ambitious and strong-willed students who are always hungry to learn and want to

represent the best image Korean-Americans. Whenever I am on the verge of giving up, I think about my parents who have sacrificed their time to offer a rich and intellectual life for me and my brother. My past has significantly increased my pride in my effort and work to sustain the Korean culture and Koreatown. Certainly, L.A Riots has inspired me to echo the voices who were muted and shaped me to become an independent and empowering woman.

Secondly, L.A Riots has taught us that courage comes from a well-built community that endlessly supports and pushes you regardless of how small you appear to others. As Henry Ford asserts “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success,” We came and moved together with one common vision: to exemplify as a body rather than individual feature. The LA Riots has united once unfamiliar faces and now companions. We were short in numbers, but were willing to defend our prized possessions and ourselves.

The future of our community looks brighter than ever. Since the end of Saigu, Koreatown has inevitably become one of the liveliest towns in Los Angeles with remarkable restaurants, annual festivals like JangTuh, and decorative cafes. Also, Koreatown has become culturally diverse in the last fifteen years, welcoming more white owners to start a restaurant and customers as they indulge in Korean cuisines. The once foreign land has transformed into a center for global education and culture. As the Korean population increases, so does our knowledge of our identity and history. From here on and out, we will always remember the sacrifices that our forefathers have made and what they have sparked here in Los Angeles: innovation and novel resources. Our only job now is to remember our scabs and turn our past mistakes into success and obstacles into our eminent skills.