

BJA ends six years in urban trenches

Black-Korean Alliance dissolves; former members say needs outstripped group's limited resources

By **Sophia Kyung Kim**
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One of the most important chapters of the ongoing saga on Korean-Black relations has closed.

Members of the Black-Korean Alliance—established six years ago to promote racial understanding between the two ethnic communities—recently voted to dissolve the grassroots organization.

The BKA began to unravel after it was confronted with one crisis after another for almost two years—first the Latasha Harlins shooting, then the boycott of John's Liquor Store and, finally, the April 29 riots.

Under community pressure, media scrutiny and public intimidation, the members—sometimes divided along racial lines—seemed unable to respond decisively, quickly and in a unified voice during those crises.

"We were constantly put under these incredibly hostile situations," said Bong Hwan Kim, the last BKA co-chairman and the executive director of the Korean Youth and Community Center. "So the membership ended up reacting all the time. You can only do that for so long until people get frustrated, burnt out and completely disillusioned."

With assistance from the Los Angeles County Human Relations



KT photo by Marissa Min

Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission consultants **Larry Aubry and Jai Lee Wong** reflect on BKA's history.

Commission, BKA was founded in 1986 to help facilitate dialogue between Korean immigrant merchants and South Central Los Angeles residents after four KA merchants were killed in April of that year.

Over the years, BKA engaged

in numerous activities designed to promote race relations. There were religious exchanges between Korean and Black churches, crime prevention seminars sponsored by the Los Angeles Police Department, scholarships and food

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given to needy students and families friendly get-togethers with Mayor Bradley attended by KA merchants and their African American counterparts.

According to BKA members, other factors contributed to its demise: soft commitment on the part of its members, lack of clearly defined goals, limited financial and human resources, and lukewarm support from their respective ethnic communities.

The BKA worked without the necessary human and financial resources, said Jerry Yu, executive director of the Korean American Coalition. He voted to disband the organization because it had "outlived its usefulness."

The crisis that took the heaviest toll on BKA was when some members of the Black community—led by Brotherhood Crusade leader Danny Bakewell—boycotted John's Liquor Store at 79th Street and Western Avenue in South Los Angeles June of last year.

The 100-day boycott began shortly after store owner Tae Sam Park fatally shot Arthur Mitchell on June 4, 1991 after the two engaged in a physical struggle after Mitchell attempted to rob the store.

The police ruled the shooting justifiable.

Korean BKA members wanted their Black counterparts to publicly oppose the boycott. But the African American BKA leaders declined to do so.

"There was silence from the African American leadership, so Bakewell appeared as if he was representing all African Americans," said Jai Lee Wong, consultant to the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission. "We had a BKA meeting. There was no unanimous view. Some African Americans felt they could not take a position against a Black leader. BKA was not able to take a position at the time."

"The low watermark was John's Liquor Store boycott," agreed Larry Aubry, senior consultant to the county Human Relations Commission. "BKA played a minimum role and didn't want to be counted on. From there, it was downhill."

There were no bad feelings among the members because of the stalemate, said Kim. "But it was more of an inability to take a public position. People were intimidated by the hostility, the overt political rhetoric on both sides."

Feeling stymied by the group's inaction, BKA members like KYCC's Kim; Edward Chang, professor of ethnic studies at UC Riverside, and Marcia Choo, project director of the Asian American Dispute Resolution Center, set

up the Korean American Race Relations Emergency Fund, which helped raise money to keep John's Market open during the boycott.

Learning that the KA community was raising money to keep the store afloat was met by "surprise" from some Black BKA members, which helped increase the level of resentment, according to Kim. "The perception was why would Koreans try to throw money to keep a store open that had no chance of surviving?" said Kim.

Should BKA be kept alive or merely revamped?

Sixteen BKA faithfuls—both Koreans and African Americans—tried to find an answer to that question at an all-day retreat Jan. 11 at the University Hilton in Los Angeles.

It was the first time that BKA members had gathered in six months after being unable to decide what position to take on the boycott.

When the retreat was over, the members decided to revamp and make it more active and influential. They selected Kim as its new Korean co-chairman, succeeding Yang Il Kim. The Rev. Galen Reeves was to continue as the Black co-chairman.

Then just as the steering committee was grappling with the direction of BKA, the April 29 riots broke out.

The civil unrest, as some like to call

it, was what "sealed the coffin" for the BKA, according to Kim. "The need to talk about dialogue after something like that was ludicrous."

"After April 29, my sense was that the task before us became even more enormous than we had acknowledged," said Choo. "The L.A. explosion went beyond the Korean-Black tension—poverty, unemployment lack of opportunities, failure of our educational system."

There also was a lack of commitment on the part of the members, according to those interviewed.

"People drifted in and out," said Wong. "When there was a crisis, people said BKA should do something. But when it came time to carry on the work, they weren't there."

A lot of people were opportunists who rode on the coattails of BKA when they wanted publicity, some said.

"A lot of people came to the visible press conferences, but when it came down to becoming a sustaining member, there were only a handful of individuals," said Choo.

Some people "used the BKA to carry out a personal agenda, individually or for their organization that they represented," agreed Wong.

Relationships among some of the members were also understandably tense at times.

"Koreans always felt like they were on defensive because of the nature of Korean-Black relations. We never had an opportunity, the kind of environment where they could be comfortably aired out," said Wong.

"There was a lot of ambivalence on the part of the players, both Blacks and Koreans, who never really felt that comfortable with each other," said Aubry. "They never forged a unity agenda. They tried, but it didn't work out. They were not willing to give the time, the emotional commitment needed."

As for financial resources, there was talk of applying for grants, but again there was disagreement about whether that avenue should even be pursued.

"We could never get the momentum to raise funds effectively," said Kim. "The city has to share part of the blame. We met with the mayor and councilmen, but there was not enough follow-up on their part. We have to blame ourselves for not organizing properly, putting necessary pressure."

The executive committee met Nov. 17 to decide BKA's future again—once and for all. In the end, they concluded that their grassroots organization had neither the resources nor the given time to meet all the demands that their respective communities had placed on them. It voted to disband.

Yu feels the BKA has accomplished

much in its six years.

"It did bring a lot of people together," he said. "I met a lot of people through BKA. That was the strength of BKA—it brought people together to talk about these things."

If there are any lessons that Wong has learned through her involvement, it's that "we cannot enter this interethnic coalition unless our own community is together," she said.

In addition, people who sit on the table with other ethnic groups must first have some kind of support from their own community, she added.

"You try to do something good, but people just sit back and criticize," said Wong.

She said that the Korean-Black issue should be reframed politically to be viewed not as tension between the two races, but more as a reflection of the failure of public policy.

Any future agenda on Black-Korean relations must now involve economic development, multicultural-coalition building and political power-building, said Kim. "We have to have more political visibility and leverage than we have," he added.

"It's somewhat ironic that a group like the BKA was dissolved at a time when the need is greater than ever to get together," Aubry said. "I am very concerned about the future."