

From a reporter's point of view

The ethnic media's role in the L.A. riots

The following testimony was presented by Sophia Kyung Kim, assignment editor at the Korea Times English Edition, before the Assembly Special Committee on the Los Angeles Crisis on July 31 at the Oriental Mission Church.

My name is Sophia Kim. I immigrated to the United States in 1965 and was educated here. As the assignment editor and a staff writer for the Korea Times English Edition, I have written about Korean-African American relations for more than 10 years.

Today, I would like to share my views on some of the issues that the Assembly Special Committee on the L.A. Crisis has asked me to address:

Was the Korea Times English Edition able to cover the Los Angeles riots objectively despite its strong connections to the Korean American community?

Yes, but I prefer the terms "fair" and "accurate" because I don't know if there is such a thing as pure objectivity in journalism.

During an Asian American Journalists Association-sponsored community forum last year on media coverage of race relations, Brother David (a spokesman for the Latasha Harlins family, who also happens to subscribe to our newspaper) stood before a microphone and praised the Korea Times English Edition as having provided the fairest coverage of the Latasha Harlins case, more than the Los Angeles Times and the Los Angeles Sentinel, an African American-owned newspaper.

Well, we have a tough editor by the name of K.W. Lee who monitors very carefully those sensitive race-relations stories, who plays the devil's advocate when he feels we are being biased. The staff writers do the same with each other's stories.

We try to adhere to the highest journalistic standards of balance. It has always been one of our top concerns, especially when it comes to writing race-relations stories, because we know that lives are literally at stake.

In fact, we feel an even greater pressure to be objective because the media coverage we have seen on the riots and Korean-African American relations has sometimes been so simplistic, unbalanced and sensational.

We see our close ties with our ethnic community as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. It is positive to have the community feel that they have access to the media. Korean Americans and other minorities may read the L.A. Times, but they don't feel they have access to it. They don't feel it's their paper.

Because of our close ties to our community, our newspaper is bombarded with people who feel comfortable enough to call us to share their stories and opinions with us. In order for our community

sources to open up, it is important that they trust us as being fair and accurate in our coverage.

With important opinion makers such as columnist Bill Boyarsky of the L.A. Times; Supervisor Gloria Molina; Ron Wakabayashi, executive director of the L.A. City Human Relations Commission; and L.A. School Board President, Warren Furutani, subscribing to our paper, it is important that these leaders hear the Korean voices, the cries, the stories that they are not going to get from the non-Korean American media.

During and after the riots, we went out of our way to exchange information about the crisis with other members of the press: the electronic media, the L.A. Times, U.S.A. Today, City News Service, Christian Science Monitor, Time, the international press, etc. Their requests for information and interviews consumed much of our time and energy. For many of them, The Korea Times English Edition was their first stop for information.

We felt an obligation to educate these mainstream journalists about what the KA community was going through because it was important that they be provided with as much information as possible. We thought that might give us some small insurance that they would write fair and balanced stories.

Our English Edition has even taken the initiative to exchange subscriptions with such publications as the Los Angeles Sentinel, Asian Week, Rafu Shimpo, The Jewish Journal and the Los Angeles Business Journal. We have often reprinted their articles and column pieces that deal with ethnic relations. Our staff even visited our counterpart in the African American community—the L.A. Sentinel—to get to know the staff there better.

I see our paper playing an important role in helping to rebuild L.A. It has been our editorial priority to put human faces on the some 2,300 faceless and nameless Korean American victims of the riots.

• There's Michelle Lee, who turned a boarded-up building into an elegant Mexican restaurant in Compton. She also lived behind the restaurant. When it was burned to a crisp, she lost everything except the clothes on her back. "Now I have nothing," she told me. "No clothes. No money. No job. No home... I wasn't afraid before the riots because the customers know me. We are friends. They are like my family."

• There's Ki Wan and Sook In Kim, a young couple who operated a grocery store in South Central L.A. They had simple dreams—not of immense wealth—but they merely wanted to settle down, start a family, own a house. But they saw their American dream go up in flames. "I worked 365 days a year, even on New Year's Day, 13 to 14 hours a day," Mr. Kim told me. "The customers feel really bad for me. I am feeling sorry for them, too. Now they have no place to go shopping."

• And 24-year-old Steve Lee, who grew up in the Deep South with African Americans, and was regarded as one of the friendliest



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merchants in the Vermont-Manchester area. Because of his popularity and involvement with the black community, he was elected by African American residents in his Vermont-Manchester Neighborhood to sit on the 77th Street Area Community-Based Policing Council, edging out other black candidates.

But that didn't stop his two family businesses—a swap meet operation and a beauty supplies store—from being looted and burned. Before his businesses were destroyed, he was on his way to attend a prayer meeting at the First AME Church along with a fellow Korean merchant.

"America is not a fair place to live. It is not a land of opportunity," he told me. But, exemplifying the KA spirit, he assured me, "I am sure we will survive. That has pretty much been the backbone of Korean society. Whether it is in South Central or wherever, Koreans will survive."

I guess that is the ultimate goal of our newspaper: To document the ongoing saga of Korean Americans in their newly adopted countries and their ability to survive under harsh circumstances.

We are documenting the extent of the riot damage, the casualties, the problems Korean Americans are facing in seeking emergency relief funds, loans and insurance, and the KAs' loss of faith in their elected officials, among other things.

We are also documenting the views of the second-generation children, who have also been

emotionally suffering from the aftermath of the riots. Because our community has been so critical of mainstream media coverage, we have also instituted on a more regular basis, media monitoring and editorial pieces critiquing the media.

Race relations has been so damaged by the riots and mainstream media coverage that we will put more continued emphasis on articles that will help our community better understand ethnic groups and help others outside our ethnic community better understand us.

The Korean American community has been through a lot of political and emotional turbulence since the Latasha Harlins shooting. Sometimes I'd arrive to work on a Monday morning, and the first thing I'd try to find out is whether any Korean merchant or merchants were killed over the weekend.

The English Edition has been keeping a roster of KA merchants who have been killed on the job for the past two years. Our stories about their deaths have not been impersonal, cold police accounts of what happened. We have attempted to humanize these tragic statistics by letting readers know that these were human beings who have left behind wives, husbands and children.

That's why I was so incensed when I heard a respected African American community leader of a black organization tell "Nightline's" Ted Koppel that relations between his and the Korean American community can start improving when "Koreans stop blowing people away."

That racially inflammatory statement was not even questioned by such a respected journalist as Koppel.

Unbeknownst to the general public, 13 KA merchants in Los Angeles County have been "blown away" since 1990 at their businesses during robbery attempts by black or Latino suspects.

That figure has been slowly coming out in some mainstream articles, and the Korea Times reporters have been responsible for providing that information to the mainstream press.

In comparison, how many African Americans have been blown away by KA merchants? I can name only one, Latasha Harlins.

Finally, there's been a big public outcry by the KA community about how the television news covered the story about the armed KA merchants who were shown randomly shooting at so-called passersby during the riots. The news reporters failed to show that KA merchants were being shot at first by drive-by shooters. From their coverage, you couldn't help but think that these merchants were just trigger-happy and shooting at innocent bystanders.

Those TV images are powerful indeed. I recently read in the L.A. Sentinel that LaChelle Woodert, an attorney for Lance Jerome Parker, one of the men charged with the beating of trucker Reginald Denny, was quoted as saying, "There were Korean merchants caught on videotape on the rooftops of their establishments shooting at passersby and I have yet to see any action taken against them by law enforcement agencies."

He must have seen those warped TV images of those armed Koreans on the rooftops of their businesses. I would have been equally outraged, too, if I didn't know the other side of the story, Mr. Woodert.