



Rebuilding Los Angeles “One Year Later or Why I Did Not Join RLA”

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I was asked to write about why I never joined the group known as “RLA.” In thinking about the reasons, I wrote the following. I offer these thoughts with hope and faith in the extraordinary strength of the human spirit:

Almost a year ago, those of us who call Los Angeles “home” were stunned as we watched the city burn. In the wake of the destruction, more than fifty-three lives were lost; thousands of small businesses were destroyed and estimates of property damage alone exceeded \$750 million. The loss of the young life of Edward Lee, a nineteen-year-old Korean American killed by friendly gun fire, was among the most poignant symbols of sacrifice made during the riots.

Since April 1992 Los Angeles has been engaged in the process of rebuilding, revitalizing, healing and recovering from the devastation. Our progress has been frustrating, painful and difficult to measure. As a community, we are confronted with some very basic questions that need to be answered before we can move ahead.

What is the vision for a Los Angeles that works? Where are we headed? Is there time to craft meaningful solutions and to take care of the myriad needs that leaped into focus in 1992? Do we really want to get along?

A number of vehicles for recovery was offered to Los Angeles during the weeks that followed the eruption in the City. Among them was an entity first known as “Rebuild L. A.,” led by ex-baseball commissioner and Olympics organizer, Peter Ueberroth. He was appointed by both Mayor Tom Bradley and Governor Pete Wilson to bring to bear his skill

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as a master planner. The organization, now known as "RLA," has become the main channel through which corporate America (also known as "the private sector") has funneled its resources in the recovery efforts.

Is there an RLA vision? Yes. It is one that is driven by a corporate model that seeks to provide jobs. By its own estimates, some 50,000 to 95,000 jobs will need to be created to stabilize the economic base in the most heavily affected areas. Unfortunately, almost a year later, less than five thousand jobs have been created. Even worse, each week Los Angeles is informed that yet another company will be closing its doors, moving its operations to a new location outside the city.

Does RLA know where it is headed? The answer is unclear. As one who has been watching its development, the only thing that seems to be clear is that RLA has the ability to communicate with large corporate entities in a way that our local politicians cannot. But this has not translated into jobs or long-term corporate commitments to Los Angeles. The obstacles to secure those commitments are obvious: the rage that continues to seethe in the community; the uncertain political future of Los Angeles and the lack of vision in crafting an economic recovery strategy for the city.

For the public to rely on RLA is a mistake. It is equipped to deal with only one part of the recovery effort. Certainly, it is a piece of the picture that is critical to our success but, it cannot (and should not) be seen as the panacea for Los Angeles.

My decision to focus my energy elsewhere was based on the fact that I recognize my skills and interests are not in conformity with a corporate approach to the challenge facing Los Angeles. Consequently, I have chosen to work as an advocate within my profession and communities from which I come—Asian American (for now, more specifically Korean American), woman and lawyer. These are the places where I believe I can be most effective and where I find I can be sustained through those periods of disappointment and frustration that come with the work of seeking social change.

In the wake of the '92 riot, a myriad of new needs was created: short-term disaster relief assistance; long-term policy and regulatory change in the areas of planning, zoning and finance; social services for limited English-speaking communities and the demand for litigation to address fundamental legal issues in both the civil and criminal arenas.

To further complicate the situation, the tensions surrounding the federal criminal trial of the four police officers accused of beating Rodney King has gripped the city. Is there time to craft a response in the midst of the media frenzy surrounding the possibility of a second riot? The time must be found and it is critical to note that achievements

and great strides are being made even though you may never read or hear about them in the news.

As stories about police riot training, skyrocketing gun purchases, the formation of unofficial "patrol units" and rumors of organized targeting for violence abound, the work of rebuilding is continuing. Because of the near-panic that has been created, that work has necessarily had to expand to address the anxiety and fear that has caused even the most dedicated individuals to doubt the worthiness of their efforts.

Unfortunately for us, the stories about accomplishments and change have not made it to the headlines. Stories such as the one of Buwon Kim whose father was brutally beaten in February 1993 have barely been reported. The young Mr. Kim quit his graduate architecture program while his brother, Hyowon Kim, left his theology studies to return to South Central Los Angeles to work the store and to support their mother. Their commitment to protect the local community from the violence that took their father's life is as great as their commitment to bring their father's murderer to justice. The story behind the absence of bitterness and vengeance is extraordinary enough for any publication or T.V. station to cover and gain wide attention. Yet, the story was told only after pushing local news stations.

The building of "Casa Loma" in Pico Union and the fact that three other similar projects to house single-parent families that are poor, hardworking and invisible has gone unnoticed. Yet these efforts represent multi-million dollar investments right here in Los Angeles. They represent jobs, cultural diversity and hope for the future. The story of the creativity behind these endeavors is fascinating to hear. Yet no one has covered this news.

The establishment of a community-based credit union in South Central Los Angeles—an initiative started by the first African American environmental organization in the country—has barely been noticed. Yet this is a significant step in the direction toward creating self-sustaining institutions within the communities that have been neglected by mainstream financial corporations. The story of the persistence, dedication and vision behind this accomplishment would inspire us all.

Where are the stories about the Women's Coalition to Rebuild Los Angeles which will be holding a series of public hearings to give women a chance to state how their agenda can be implemented by the political leadership? This is precisely the kind of bottom-up approach that everyone was talking about a year ago when the cry was, "No more business as usual!" Where is the coverage on how this new approach gives voice to the voiceless and brings women into the planning process and public dialogue in a creative, new way? We have yet to see this

activity reported by the media.

Do we really want to get along? Of course we do. The question is how to get there. Each community has embarked on meeting the most pressing need of its members. The resources are not growing, they are shrinking. Given the widespread trauma of the April 1992 riot, burdens have become greater rather than less. Despite all of this, we know that most people do not want to see more violence and destruction. We also know that Los Angeles will likely remain "home" to many. Those among us who see a future in Los Angeles will continue to find creative ways to communicate, educate and advocate.