

Immigrants' views

# Merchants' shattered dreams

## Among the first and hardest hit, four store owners in South Central Los Angeles share their stories of terror, anger and disbelief.

By **Sophia Kyung Kim**  
Korea Times

### Maria's Mexican Restaurant

When Michelle Lee bought Maria's Mexican Restaurant in Compton in 1984, the building was boarded up. It took her nine months to turn the urban eyesore into an elegant oasis.

Today, all that Lee has left are the clothes on her back. Her restaurant and her home—a storage room located behind the eatery—were burned down by arsonists. Her uninsured restaurant, located at 1314 E. Rosecrans Blvd., sustained about \$80,000 in damages.



The remains of Maria's Mexican Restaurant in Compton.

Two other Korean-owned businesses in that building—a market and a Chinese restaurant—also went up in flames.

When she bought the business in the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood, there was nothing inside, recalled the middle-aged divorcee. It had been shut down for almost two years.

Lee sat on her jeans and rolled up her sleeves. She painted the walls, decorated the tables with silk flowers, installed a satellite dish for soccer lovers, built a bathroom, put beautiful tiles on the floor and fixed the plumbing.

"I made it beautiful," she said with a smile. "My customers loved it. They said they had never seen a business like that in their community."

Lee even lived in the same neighborhood with her customers. She had converted a storage room in a building behind the restaurant into a home. She wanted to be close to work. Her home is now in rubble.

"Now I have nothing. No clothes. No money. No job. No home," said Lee, who immigrated to the United States in 1979. "She said that she was wearing her older sister's clothes. Lee also has an old hospital debt of \$5,000 that she must pay off. She injured her knee while working and had to have surgery."

She doesn't know too much about the Rodney King case, Lee said. But when the verdict was announced on April 29, she didn't anticipate any trouble.

"I wasn't afraid because the customers know me and I've been in that area for four years. I know them. We are friends. They are like my family."

That Wednesday evening, a friend phoned her twice to see if she was safe. He advised her to check her restaurant and flee the neighborhood immediately. But she did not heed his warnings.

Two hours later, her friend sent someone to pick her up. Her business was still standing then.

As the two headed toward Los Angeles on the Harbor Freeway, Lee said she could barely see in front of her.

"I saw lots of fire. Oh my God! It was so foggy, right and left. Fire, fire, fire. Then I got scared."

Lee returned to her home and business three days later on Saturday. She knew what to expect. By then, a Korean man had informed her that her store was in ashes.

"When I was told, I felt nothing," she said. "I didn't cry. I was just shocked. My feeling now is, whatever God wants to do, I'll follow him."

Lee said she didn't shed a single tear upon hearing the news. She still hasn't. Her life has been plagued by many tragedies, too many to count and too complex to explain, she said.

"This fire is one of many tragedies. This is not the worst that has happened to me," she said.

In fact, her eyes got teary and her voice began quivering over an incident that happened decades ago.

"When I was a little girl, I saw my younger baby brother die before my eyes. That shock has stayed with me my whole life," she said. "I never talked about it before."

Lee is now staying with her older sister in Los Angeles.

"I'm trying to relax, not think about anything," she said. "I know my body system. If I think too much, I'm going to get very sick. Now I just watch TV. I told my sister, 'Don't push me about looking for a job.'"

She asks, "Why didn't the politicians and police come to help?"

### Jenny's Market

Ki Wan and Sook In Kim lost more than their grocery store to looters and arsonists.

The young couple saw their American dream go up in flames in South Central Los Angeles.

"We had simple dreams," said Kim, 30. "We wanted to settle down, start a family, own a house. Now we have lost our hopes, our dreams. I'm scared."

On April 29, the day the Rodney King verdict was announced, the Kims received a phone call from their alarm company at 1 a.m. They were told that their store's alarm had been set off.

Kim tried to call the police, but was told the police was too busy to handle his complaint. There was nothing he could do except wait for the sun to rise.

In the morning, the Kims drove to their store located at 1498 W. Compton Blvd. When they arrived, they found nothing but smoldering ashes.

The two broke down in tears.

"As soon as we saw it, we were shocked. We cried, thinking, 'What are we going to do?'" Kim recalled.

Kim also owned the building where his full-service market was located. The fire caused about \$600,000 in damages. The Kims are insured, but they don't know how much they're covered for because their policy papers got burned.

Despite his losses, Kim said he hasn't turned into a hateful, bitter man.

"I just blame the government," he said. "They should have



Owners of Jenny's Market, Sook In Kim and husband, Ki Wan Kim, wait to file an insurance claim.

protected the community. They were slow and irresponsible. Poverty is up in this country. Because many Hispanics and blacks are poor, they blamed their poor economic state on Koreans."

Kim immigrated to America 11 years ago. He graduated from USC with a major in computer engineering. He forsook a white-collar profession to become his own boss. He wanted to make money, he said.

He saved and borrowed enough money to open up Jenny's Market almost two years ago.

"I had no days off since I took over that business," Kim said. "I worked 365 days a year, even on New Year's Day, 13 to 14 hours a day."

The couple had considered themselves lucky—until the fire. They had never been held up or burglarized. They got along with their customers. Minor theft was their biggest problem, Kim said.

His customers feel sorry for what has happened to his store, Kim said.

"They feel really bad for me. I am feeling sorry for them, too. Now they have no place to go shopping."

His customers have pleaded with him to "rebuild the market as soon as possible," Kim said. "They want me to go back. They said the looters, arsonists came from outside the neighborhood. I believe them."

But Kim has no plans to return.

"I don't want to rebuild over there. I will move out."

### Slauson Furniture and Pink Furniture stores

William Kim was at home watching television April 29 Wednesday when he heard news of looting and fires in the neighborhood, where he owned two furniture stores.

The next morning, he arrived at one of his stores, Slauson Furniture, located at Vermont and Slauson avenues. It was looted and burned to the ground.

The looters were attempting to clean out Kim's second store, Pink Furniture, located at Florence Avenue and Broadway Street, when he arrived at the scene. He witnessed his business partner, Yong Hwan Sul, getting beat up by looters when Sul tried to stop the vandals.

"There were about 30 policemen across the street just standing there doing nothing while my partner was getting beat up," recalled Kim, 30.

Though his businesses were not insured, Kim plans to rebuild the stores.

"They cannot drive us out," he said. He also urged other KAs to rebuild and stay in the neighborhood.

"The same thing could happen wherever we Koreans go," he said. "(America) is my home. I've got to stay here."

Asked what he thought about some of the KA merchants who armed themselves, Kim said, "I'm very proud of them. That's what the First Amendment is about, the right to bear arms and defending yourself."

Kim, who immigrated to the United States in 1973, believed the King verdict was unjust.

"All the four officers were guilty," he said.

But the looting and burning of his stores were committed by greedy, opportunistic people, he said, not by angry protesters eager to make a political statement.

Like others, Kim blamed the politicians and the police for the emotional and physical devastation.

"The political fingerprinting has got to stop," he said. "Bradley and Gates must go."

### Handy Auto Repair

The lot on South Western Avenue and 64th Street had been empty for who knows how long.

That's until Seppano U. Han built a new building and opened up an auto repair business there in 1985.

Han's building is still standing today, but his Handy Auto Repair shop has been looted and heavily damaged. The machinery and merchandise were either destroyed or stolen.

By destroying his store, the looters destroyed something "that was part of myself," said Han. "That store was like my own body."

Han closed his shop located at 6405 S. Western Ave. around 5 p.m. April 29. He couldn't return to his business until the following Saturday because it was too dangerous.

"When my son and I went down there, it was almost all gone. I was angry. I was mad and crying," he said.

The lot around the building had been set on fire, but to his relief, flames did not touch the structure.

The vandals caused about \$50,000 in damages. Han has no insurance. "The premiums are too high in that area," he said. "We are a small business."

Han, 49, said he is now bankrupt. Profits from his business had helped pay for his 80-year-old house in Hancock Park, a car and his two children's college education.

"Now I don't know what's going to happen. I have lots of payments," he said. "I have no money. My wife is a housewife."

His predominantly black customers also have shed tears for him, said Han, who immigrated to America in 1982.

"My neighbors are good," he said. "They cried, too. They said sorry to me. My customers are mad, too. The gangs were the problem."

An auto mechanic in Korea, Han said the building that he built improved the community environment.

"I helped the neighborhood by coming in. Before, it was deserted, nothing there."

Han plans to apply for a low-interest SBA loan and eventually re-open.

"My Korean neighbors said they will open their stores again and come back," he said.

He noted that practically all the Korean-owned businesses around him were burned down—markets, liquor stores, dry cleaners and video shops.

"I blame the government," he said. "There was no police."

Edward Hwang contributed to this story.