

Learn, Baby, Learn: Lessons from Latasha Harlins' tragedy

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“Why do you run those killing stories in your English paper? Do you want us to get killed?” a desperate Korean voice at the end of the phone line tongue-lashed me for reporting a rash of fatal shootings of Korean mom-and-pop store owners in holiday season holdups.

“Every time we read this killing news, our heart stops beating and we die.”

The caller went on: “We say our last good-bye each day when we leave home for the store. Every day is a lucky day for us.”

Stunned, I remained speechless.

“Things are rough enough, but we dread the day when somebody there is killed by one of the shopkeepers. We dread to read that kind of news more than anything else.”

The ghetto merchant hung up, uttering in a quivering whisper: “Pray that won't happen.”

That dreaded moment came when an immigrant Korean shopkeeper in a black neighborhood pulled the trigger for the first time in her life, fatally shooting a 15-year-old black girl during a scuffle over a bottle of orange juice. A mindless act that snuffed out the life of a teen-ager.

“Oh, no,” I gasped, haunted by the last caller's parting words. The news must or should have hurt like a sharp

blade for every thoughtful Korean American who can read or hear.

It's agreed that Soon Ja Du, 49, shot the girl. After that, the accounts of the fatal shooting diverge. But the truth in the tragic encounter will emerge in her murder trial, with her peers deciding the defendant's fate.

Shootings couldn't have come at a worse time when the City of Los Angeles—especially the frustrated African American community—is outraged by the brutal beating of an unarmed black motorist by its finest. And the mass media—notably the only major daily in town—have descended on the tragedy with its inflammatory journalism, pouring gasoline instead of oil on the troubled waters.

Almost overnight, the delicate handiwork of interethnic dialogue, understanding and cooperation crafted by a dedicated group of both African American and Korean immigrant leaders over the years was shattered.

Lives in America's war zones—especially those of young African Americans—are cheaper than those soldiers in the sands of Saudi Arabia.

We grieve for the untimely and senseless death of Latasha Harlins and her American Dream—her name etched in the collective consciousness of Korean

Americans everywhere.

But public apology and grief is not enough.

It's no time for alibis, excuses and fingerpointing and public posturing. Rhetoric is cheap.

Blessed are the peacemakers who heal the wounds of violence and anger. And we are blessed with a splendid collection of both African American and Korean community leaders who have

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forged a bond of goodwill and understanding through countless church exchanges, Black-Korean Alliance

sessions, joint business ventures, mediation workshops, fund raising and grocers' support of community projects.

No sooner than the dreaded news surfaced, did they issue a joint statement of shock, sorrow and resolve to redouble their joint efforts.

This heroic group has been working together to build bridges of understanding between the two communities ever since the spring of 1986 when four Korean merchants were killed in a short span of a month.

“The death of Latasha Harlins challenges us to come together as a united multicultural community and acknowledge the often painful process of learning to live together with people different from ourselves,” they said in a joint

statement.

The roster lists 19 multiracial community leaders marked with a sense of commitment and vision including representatives of both city and county human relations commissions, from Mayor Tom Bradley's office and major civil rights groups.

One of the group's leaders is Larry Aubry of the L.A. County Human Relations Commission and an *L.A. Sentinel* columnist. He is a passionate black community advocate who is also a healer and a seer who is wiser than the proverbial owl in interethnic relations.

Now that the healing process is in place, hard work lies before us New Americans.

The black neighbors of the Empire Liquor Market in South Los Angeles simply want respect from their Korean merchants.

It's about time we Korean Americans realize we just can't buy respect and goodwill from our African American neighbors. We have to earn their respect the American way—by learning to be good neighbors.

Our immigration history is nearly as old as Latasha. We have a long, winding road ahead of us.

We must say loud and clear, “Learn, baby, learn,” as the late and former Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell would exhort his congregation in those flaming Civil Rights years.