

## An American Passage

Latasha becomes part of our collective conscience

By K.W. Lee  
Editor

Compassion and leniency, yes, and courage, yes, but justice, no, no, no.

That's how I reacted to Superior Court Judge Joyce A. Karlin's imposition of straight probation on Soon Ja Du for fatally shooting a neighborhood black teen-ager during a scuffle over a \$1.79 bottle of orange juice at her family-owned store.

And may I hasten to add that my reactions reflected the private feelings of many in a troubled community of newcomers torn by swirling emotions of relief, shock and fear—deathly afraid of violent backlash from the outraged African American community.

Du, convicted of voluntary manslaughter in the March 16 slaying of 15-year-old Latasha Harlins in South Central Los Angeles, could have been sentenced to 16 years in prison for the crime.

Instead, in the name of healing, the judge sentenced the 51-year-old mother of three to five years probation, a \$500 fine, 400 hours of community service and an order to pay for the girl's funeral.

► See **Latasha**, Page 6

## Latasha: a haunting presence among Korean Americans

from page 1

Some justice, I was compelled to mutter. Not one day in jail for taking a human life. In stark contrast to her fellow Korean immigrant Brendan Sheen, who has been given 30 days in county jail for abusing his dog.

I had dreaded this moment shortly after Mrs. Du's jury—sans Asians on the panel—decided she must be punished for the crime of voluntary manslaughter. In fact, few among the black and Korean community leaders who had been engaged in thankless peacemaking efforts had expected the Du woman would be given straight probation for her offense.

Karlin's is a misjudgment grievously myopic. Despite her fervently felt hope for healing, her sentence touched off a torrent of fury among the black community and a shiver of consternation among the voiceless and bewildered Korean merchants in seething South Central.

Little wonder. Justice, in today's Los Angeles in flux, can't operate in a vacuum. Justice, like rain, must fall evenly in South Central, Koreatown or Beverly Hills alike. And justice, to be real-world justice, must breathe with peoples of all colors and tongues.

Indeed, few reasonable people may fault the lofty intentions behind Karlin's judgment. She makes a persuasive case for refusing to incarcerate the Korean woman with little English knowledge in that Du fired a gun out of fear and panic, not knowing that the gun had been altered to have a hair trigger, which would discharge at slight pressure.

Karlin reasoned the alteration of the gun may have caused the killing, noting that her family had been terrorized by neighborhood gangs and that she committed the crime "under great provocation and duress."

Appealing for peace between both communities, she said she hoped "something positive comes out of this tragedy, by having the Latasha Harlins death mark the beginning rather than an end—a beginning of what I would like to see as greater understanding and acceptance between two groups."

She further said the Harlins girl's death should be remembered as "the catalyst that must force members of the African American and Korean

communities to confront an intolerant situation by creating constructive solutions...so that a similar tragedy can never be repeated."

Honestly, I am torn between the world of Latasha Harlins and Soon Ja Du, each sharing the tragic everyday life in one of the city's most violent and wretched districts—both in pursuit of that elusive American Dream.

But Latasha is no more, her dream snuffed out by a bullet fired by the immigrant grocer. Mrs. Du is alive and free, although she undoubtedly will bear the burden of her guilt the rest of her new life in America.

I, along with every thoughtful Korean who can read or hear, share the grief and anger of the Harlins family and friends.

Latasha's name is etched deeply in the collective conscience of Korean Americans everywhere in their American passage.

It's reassuring to know that family friend Gina Ray believes that Latasha's death should serve as a catalyst for better relations between blacks and

Korean Americans.

"I'm not mad at any Korean person. I want that clear," she said. "I am angry at the justice system...African Americans don't get justice in the United States."

The Karlin shock couldn't have come at a worse time when dozens of both black and Korean leaders were deeply involved in working out mechanics and measures to ease the ongoing frictions in South Central.

For a fleeting spell, it seemed, a ray of sunshine began to seep through at the end of the tunnel.

The media-fueled racial fires were mercifully contained through the heroic efforts of black and Korean peacemakers. Just days before the shock, both sides under the ever-patient encouragement of Mayor Tom Bradley, hammered out a historic new job program for black youths.

The program run by black community groups will provide 100 new jobs among the participating Korean grocers in Los Angeles, serving as a pilot project for similar efforts in Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C.

Fate has not been kind to both communities.

Almost overnight, the delicate handiwork of can-win programs for South Central were shattered.

There's fear and suspicions in the air. But all's not doom and gloom.

Cooler and wiser heads on both sides appear to have prevailed, thus far. Established black leaders and activists alike have called on their people to channel fury into political empowerment and economic development.

For our part, public pronouncements and statements aren't enough. We New Americans must demonstrate through plain and specific deeds that we are not only good neighbors but participants in helping rebuild the scarred and ravaged neighborhoods.

That's the No. One lesson from the Latasha Harlins tragedy. And that's the only way for us to remember and cherish the name of a young soul who, like so many young African Americans, has died so young.