

Press-Telegram

May 17, 1992

COMPTON REACHES OUT FOR UNDERSTANDING

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The future of race relations in the Southland might be found in a doughnut shop in Compton.

As people throughout the country try to comprehend how the abyss between ethnic groups could have grown so deep, the regulars at Winchell's Donut House on Alondra Boulevard have been predicting urban rebellion, and discussing ways to build a safer, saner, more just community. The discussion has gone on for decades.

"Blacks have run out of cheeks to turn," says Lou Robinson, a 50-year-old salesman who's been coffee klatching with his buddies here for years. "America is broken down from the White House to the ghetto.

"The violence isn't over. The blacks have lost faith in the system. We've lost faith in ourselves. We older people still have a lot of love. But the youngsters don't care."

And from Alex Hartley, an executive with Community Development Corporation West: "I am no more or less hopeful about the future than I was before the riots. But one thing is certain. The violence isn't over.

"There can't be a future when all the president talks about is law and order. "John Kennedy had a vision for the future. He said, 'Let's go to the moon.' During those years, Americans were better people. There was a Zen point of view. There was an understanding that what's important is the journey.

"Our children have no hope. What do they have to look forward to?"

On this weekday morning, Robinson has met up with some of his friends at the doughnut shop to read the paper and play a game of chess or double solitaire. He's nicknamed the restaurant "The Spot." At any time of the day or night, well dressed middle-class blacks talk politics and swap gossip with poor non-whites. If Compton is "The Hub City," the doughnut shop is considered the hub of the hub, a place where people from all walks of life comfortably congregate, a safe, friendly haven amid a troubled inner-city area.

Not far from where customers talk about the lessons of the Los Angeles riots, faint traces of smoke still linger, a grisly reminder of the fire and fury that gripped scores of businesses in Compton just two weeks ago.

From the window of the shop, customers can read a prayer that's attached to a sign at the Truth Outreach Ministries across the street. "And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children." Isaiah 54:13

Lorraine Powell is too tired to read the Bible verse. She's just come to pick up her friend, a cashier at Winchell's. Powell is 39 and she says she has a bad case of battle fatigue.

"During the riots, I was locked up in my house with no lights from Thursday to Monday," she says in a monotone. "The situation here is sad. It's pitiful. It's awful. The riots made up my mind. I'm going back to New Orleans before the end of the year.

"The future of L.A. is going to be rough."

Powell works at Hollywood Park, where she sells racing programs. She has a 21-year-old daughter and two grandchildren.

She says she's been so damned drained since violence paralyzed her neighborhood, she knows she isn't very good company. She apologizes, and slowly shakes her head.

“Things have gotten so bad, I don't see how they could get any better. There ain't nothing here. Nothing's left.

“I feel sorry for my kids. It's going to be rough for them.”

As some customers talk about the need for better police protection in the inner city, others say the future of the Southland lies in finding ongoing ways for people to get to know one another as human beings. The moral laissez-faire of the Reagan years didn't work, they say, and the current divisions and separations along racial lines can't work.

“I've been getting different ethnic groups together for years,” says Hartley, a dedicated community activist who occasionally substitutes at Compton High.

“Compton is like a small town, but people are afraid to come here. I'm concerned that the riots will offer a convenient excuse for people not to get off the Blue Line and talk to one another.

“Compton is no more dangerous than Beverly Hills. We don't have kids here who shoot their parents. We don't have people here who took advantage of the S&Ls.

“But nobody ever comes down here to talk to us. It would be nice if people were a lot less fearful. The vision of the future has got to include us, not just the people who live in Orange County.”

With two preschoolers in tow, Dolores Stallworth, 29, hurriedly stops in for a cup of coffee. She's en route to her job flipping hamburgers at McDonald's, but is pleased to share her concerns about the present and hopes for the future.

Stallworth is from Guam. Her husband, who works as a cashier, is black.

“The kids are half and half,” she says. “I'm very worried how people will treat them.

“The officials in this country have got to talk to the people who are racists. My hope is that the people who are racists will be told by officials that racism just isn't part of our life. Racism can't be part of anybody's life in America. It just can't.”

As she rushes off, four 13-year-olds from neighboring Roosevelt Middle School take her place in line. When asked about the riots, Laura Sierra giggles. “It looked like fun,” the teen-ager says of the looters. “The people who took things looked happy. In a way, the riots were good. The homeless people got food and clothes and couches.

“I think people want to steal again.”

Sierra, whose parents were reared in Mexico, says she hopes one day to go to college and would like to be a police officer. “Some cops help people,” she says. “Others just like to beat people up.”

All week as politicians discussed the rebuilding of the Southland, Erie Powell thought about the youth of America. He listened as President George Bush toured Los Angeles and told police officers he wanted to “get to the root cause” of the unrest.

Bush might have gotten a few answers if he'd sat down and had a cup of coffee with Erie Powell. Powell, 62, recently retired from a job in shipping and receiving for TRW. He's been a regular at the doughnut shop for 27 years. He lives in Lynwood where he raised seven kids. One of them got messed up with drugs. Several years ago, he hanged himself.

“Young people today are moody and mean,” Powell says. “They don't care anymore. After the Watts riots in '65, we all talked and talked and talked and talked. Very little came of it.

“Now, there are only two classes - rich and poor. The middle class is fading away. I worry about another chaos. People are unsatisfied. They are all saying, ‘It ain't over yet.’ If we don't do something, the whole country is going to burn up. There will be complete chaos.

“We need training programs. We need better communication with police. We need a president with vision.”

Tony Owens, a pump operator for the Compton Water Department, agrees. But he says the most pressing need of all is to strengthen the American family. ``We've allowed the kids to control the parents and the streets," Owens says. ``They want to gain material things. Family values are low on the list.

``People are losing pride. It isn't a black thing, it's a poor thing. The country needs grown-ups.

``The power structure should be very concerned."