



The City of Los Angeles  
**HUMAN RELATIONS**  
**COMMISSION**

**Forward Together Report**

Los Angeles City Human Relations Commission

**Executive Summary**

The Forward Together report explores the programming and outcomes of several initiatives organized by the Forward Together Ad Hoc Committee, which sought to not only commemorate the 30th anniversary of the 1992 Los Angeles Civil Unrest but also to find ways to bridge the divide between the Black and Korean communities in LA.

While these initiatives have indicated that tensions between the communities continue to exist, intentional community bridging efforts are alleviating tensions and facilitating dialogue on how we can move Forward Together. Overall, the Human Relations Commission recommends the following: adopting the leadership dialogue recommendations, producing a third season of the LA Together Podcast, and creating and disseminating a human relations business guide/curriculum.

**I. Introduction**

In January 2022, the Office of the Mayor requested that the Human Relations Commission partner with civic and community stakeholders to create programming for the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the April 1992 Los Angeles Civil Unrest. Specifically, the Office noted that the programming should highlight the relationship between the Black and Korean communities of Los Angeles. The resulting project, Forward Together, launched six components in April 2022, including a leadership dialogue series, a podcast series, a business guide to human relations, a symposium, community events, and an online events calendar.

The Forward Together Ad Hoc Committee members were Commissioners Courtney Morgan-Greene (Ad Hoc Committee Chair), Angelica Solis-Montero, Stacy Twilley, Rosa Russell, and Brooke Wirschafter.

Project support was provided by Civil + Human Rights and Equity Department General Manager Capri Maddox, Assistant General Manager Claudia Luna, Senior Project Coordinator Francisco Ortega, Communications Direct Mark Pampanin, Communications Deputy Tajwar Khan, Human Relations Advocate Sheldon Cruz, and CORO Fellow Devina Ortega.

## **A. The Forward Together Leadership Dialogues**

### **1. Introduction**

The Human Relations Commission hosted three facilitated dialogues at the Civil + Human Rights and Equity Department John Lewis Conference Center, focusing on the 1992 Civil Unrest and the relationship between the Black and Korean communities. The first two dialogues were between leaders from the Black and Korean communities, and the third dialogue added Latinx leaders and leaders from the broader Asian diaspora. While there were only three dialogue sessions, universal themes, perceptions, and recommendations emerged.

### **General Findings**

Participants acknowledged the historic conflict between the Black and Korean communities in Los Angeles. They highlighted that intentional coalition building has helped alleviate but not eliminate tensions. Conflict still exists in the community and may be present at the leadership level. In previous years, dialogues about the 1992 Civil Unrest devolved into finger-pointing and rehashing of historic events. Participants wanted to find a better way forward together.

Participants agreed that the societal shift in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder and resulting protests shined a light on the fact that the conflict between their communities was designed by outside forces. They also agreed that Black and Korean communities are intentionally pitted against each other to enhance white supremacy and this premise should be central to any conversation or narrative about the 1992 Civil Unrest. They emphasized that misinformation is rampant, and a shift in narrative, continued dialogue, community building, and education are keys to creating better understanding and unity.

### **2. Continued Challenges**

Irrespective of this historical context, the pitting of the two communities against one another was a highly successful endeavor, and the details of how that friction played out still reverberate throughout both the Korean and Black communities. The old wounds cut deep and create lingering animosity, which is difficult to set aside.

a. Reframing the Narrative

The participants agreed on the importance of correcting the narrative of the Civil Unrest as it is understood within the broader Angeleno community while experiencing directly the difficulty in achieving this outcome. Even the dialogue participants, with their intellectual understanding of the historical context, their commitment to building unity, and their articulated desire to reframe/correct the narrative, had difficulty fully reframing the narrative for themselves.

b. Misinformation

Many participants remained eager to retell the events of 1992 from their perspective, often omitting details or relaying common misinformation that placed their community in a more favorable light and the other community in a less favorable light. Both Korean and Black community members expressed that they felt misunderstood by the other community and that media coverage of the relationship between the two communities often fueled the flames of discord.

Participants were surprised to learn statistics about the current state of hate crimes. Los Angeles and the nation experienced a sharp increase in anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the 2020 Los Angeles County Hate Crime Report, crimes targeting Asian Pacific Americans increased by 76%. Asian people now represent 21% of hate crime victims despite being only 16% of the population. In cases in which a suspect was identified, 42% were white, 36% were Latinos, and 19% were Black. Hate crimes have also gone up against the Black community; Black people account for 52% of hate crime victims while only 9% of the overall population is Black.

Participants discussed how the media continues to fuel the animosity between their two groups, by largely presenting a narrative that Black Americans are responsible for the increase in hate crimes against the Asian community when statistics show that, in reality, Black Americans are the most common victims of hate crimes and white Americans are the most common culprits of hate crime against Asian people.

Further, there are long-standing misconceptions that Korean people are wealthy immigrants who purposely take advantage of impoverished communities. In reality, many Koreans immigrated for economic opportunities and to escape political uncertainty. However, they found upon arrival that they could only get bank loans or community funding to operate small businesses in low-income neighborhoods primarily populated by Black and Latino Americans. In addition, Korean elders are more likely to live below the poverty line than any other group in Los Angeles County.

Similarly, there is a longstanding misconception that Black people have had the same opportunities as Koreans and have simply failed to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. This misconception is fueled by a lack of knowledge about the historic and current systems that conspire heavily against Black upward mobility.

c. 1992 Riots, Uprising, or Civil Unrest?

While the desire to move towards greater unity and understanding was evident, tensions still arose and the Black and Korean participants remained at an impasse about several issues pertaining to the 1992 Civil Unrest. First, the communities disagree about the very name and nature of the Civil Unrest, with the Korean

Community focusing on the destruction of property and largely referring to it as the “1992 Riots” and the Black Community focusing on it as a response to systemic oppression and largely referring to it as the “1992 Uprising.”

d. Anti-Blackness

There was disagreement about the efficacy of the behavior of Black people during the unrest. Interestingly, these sentiments were largely divided along generational lines, with older Koreans and younger Black people citing that protesters should be peaceful or risk losing sympathy for their cause, while younger Koreans and older Black people tended to express that individuals should not be called upon to act reasonably in the face of violence and oppression. They expressed that some negative behavior does not mean that Black people deserve oppression or should be without a recourse to advance justice. The members of the Korean community who condemned rioting appeared hesitant to do so and some became withdrawn during this discussion.

It is important to note that during the dialogues the Black community was largely portrayed as rioters and looters even though most Black people did not participate in the unrest and many who participated did so peacefully. The Latinx community continued to be largely omitted from the narrative though they are a major demographic in the neighborhoods where the unrest occurred, and they made up a substantial portion of arrests during the unrest.

e. The Killing of Latasha Harlins

The most hotly contested and debated point of the 1992 Unrest among participants remained the killing of 15-year-old Black high school student, Latasha Harlins, by 50-year-old Korean shopkeeper, Soon Ja Du. The Korean and Black participants simply do not view the circumstances of the killing of Latasha Harlins and the criminal prosecution of Soon Ja Du through the same lens and some younger Korean participants did not know very much about the case and elected to primarily listen.

Korean leadership expressed unequivocally that Soon Ja Du was ultimately unjustified in her actions. They stated that all Koreans should not be unfairly painted with a broad brush because of this incident. They maintained that responsibility for the outcome of the case lies with the justice system, specifically the white judge that decided Soon Ja Du's sentence, and not the Korean community. While there seemed to be some agreement between Black and Korean participants on these points, tensions ran high when discussing Latasha Harlins and Soon Ja Du as individual actors.

Korean participants offered mitigating circumstances in defense of Soon Ja Du. Some condemned Latasha Harlins' behavior in the moments leading up to her death and sometimes offered accounts that were inconsistent with the historical record. Many stated that there is an overemphasis on this case. Korean participants also denounced the LA Times Column: [The killing of Latasha Harlins was 30 years ago. Not enough has changed](#) because the article purportedly compared Soon Ja Du to those who murdered Emmett Till.

By contrast, Black leadership found any defense of Soon Ja Du or villainization of Latasha Harlins totally unjustifiable and expressed that the Korean community should denounce her and her actions completely. They suggested that the Korean community is painted with a broad brush due to the community's continued defense of Soon Ja Du and the villainization of Latasha Harlins. Many Black participants became silent and withdrawn from the dialogue after statements by Korean participants relating to Latasha Harlins.

### 3. Common Ground

Interestingly, the Black and Korean communities largely agree about the injustice presented by the Rodney King case and there was little interest in discussing it. Both communities agree that the media portrayal of their communities and the conflict between them is problematic. Both communities also share the perception that during the unrest City response services were directed away from the site of the unrest (South Los Angeles and Koreatown) and directed toward wealthy white communities (West Los Angeles) even though there was little to no unrest there.

### 4. A Strong Desire to Move Forward Together

Overall, despite moments of tension, the Black and Korean community participants expressed solidarity with one another and a desire to protect each other from harmful actors and systems in the larger society. Some expressed the importance and power of calling out bad actors in their own group when they harm the other.

### 5. Leadership Dialogue Recommendations

The Human Relations Commission is grateful for the wisdom of the leaders who participated in the dialogues and their willingness to engage in the difficult conversations.

Based on the discussions, the Human Relations Commission developed a set of initial recommendations for moving forward together.

The Human Relations Commission acknowledges that the 1992 Civil Unrest has left an indelible scar on the history and people of Los Angeles that can never be fully erased. While we cannot erase the scar, we can strive to create the best possible path forward to heal, to prevent similar traumas from being repeated, and to establish unity, understanding, and belonging for all Angelenos.

To this end, the Human Relations Commission recommends the City of Los Angeles, by and through the City Council and Mayor, adopt the following:

1. Adopt “1992 Civil Unrest” and “Civil Unrest of 1992” as neutral terms for the events of 1992 unless and until such time that the Black and Korean communities commonly agree to an alternative name.
2. Acknowledge systemic racism as the principal cause of the conflict between the Black and Korean communities in Los Angeles and the principal cause of the 1992 Civil Unrest. It is essential that this concept is the central premise of any conversation, statement, or narrative about the relationship between the Black and Korean communities. As LA City has more widespread discussions about systemic racism, we must remember that American structures were not created with communities of color in mind, but to protect privilege and power for white populations, in particular white males.
3. Acknowledge that the systematic pitting of the Black and Korean communities against each other was a powerful tool reinforced by government and social systems and actors to maintain and enhance existing power structures. Banks, schools, courts, and housing providers were built within a racist system that intentionally or unintentionally benefitted white communities. These institutions have codified a racialized culture of measures and barriers—from redlining to school segregation—meant to keep communities of color out. Urban renewal programs of the 1960s, famously dubbed "Negro Removal" by novelist James Baldwin were described to help revitalize poor Black neighborhoods, but instead led to widespread displacement of Blacks and gentrification.

It may be helpful to acknowledge that oppressive systems of power have used division as a tool throughout history to ensure that oppressed communities focus on infighting instead of uniting to dismantle broader systems of oppression.

This division has led to real-life negative interactions between the communities, with real-life consequences that lead to lingering animosity between the two communities.

In order to heal, the Black and Korean communities must come to view the unfortunate incidents and circumstances between them for what they are, a strategic result of systemic racism. To achieve the best possible outcome, communities must point the finger at systemic racism and not one other.

4. Create and disseminate an educational campaign with written documents, hosted events, community dialogues, and memorial programs, that clearly outline the events leading up to and during the 1992 Civil Unrest. This educational campaign will include information about the:
  - a. Oppression of Black people in America/Los Angeles
  - b. Oppression of Korean people and immigration history to America/ Los Angeles
  - c. Key historical moments that have contributed to wealth stripping in South Los Angeles. In the 1960s, federal subsidies for urban sprawl led to disinvestment in the central city and increased development of suburban areas. Along with redlining, restrictive covenants in housing and mortgage lending disadvantaged communities of color, facilitated “white flight,” in which many of the wealthy and white abandoned the central city for the suburbs. The California State Highway Commission's campaign built I-10 through the heart of South Central Los Angeles. Deindustrialization and loss of jobs through a number of large plant closings. The succession of Korean immigrants into small businesses previously owned by Jewish Americans in South LA. The convergence of all these factors set the context for tensions and conflicts between Blacks and Koreans that started to peak at the start of the 1990s.
  - d. Facts and statistics about the 1992 Civil Unrest including statistics about the devastation to Koreatown, Korean-owned businesses and the Korean Community, who suffered from arson, looting, and deaths.
  - e. History of the Rodney King Case,
  - f. Facts and history about the killing of Latasha Harlins as contained in the legal record and confirmed by surveillance video.
5. Continued dialogues and events featuring the Black and Korean communities/leadership as well as building more multi-racial solidarity events.
6. Promotion of positive stories of unity between the Black and Korean communities

7. Continued commemoration of the 1992 Civil Unrest with a measurable outcome such as a standardized survey taken at each commemoration to gauge the progress of the relationship between the Black and Korean leadership and study of the trends in incidents between the two communities to help gauge progress and revise and adjust these recommendations.
8. Creation, adoption, and dissemination of a Human Relations Business Curriculum based on the Business Guide below.

The dialogues produced powerful discussions between community members of color. They garnered data about experiences, sentiments, and common misperceptions and led to actionable recommendations for how to improve community relationships. Participants expressed a desire to continue the conversation.

### **B. The Forward Together Podcast**

Commissioner Stacey Twilley executive produced the Forward Together podcast in partnership with the USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism. The podcast featured three episodes released between April 29 (the date the civil unrest began in 1992) and May 5 (the last day of the unrest in 1992). The podcast was launched with the support of the Office of the Mayor, the USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism, USC student producers, and was narrated by celebrated journalist Lisa Ling. The project was also supported by CHRED staff Assistant General Manager Claudia Luna, Senior Project Coordinator Francisco Ortega, Communications Director Mark Pampanin, and Communications Deputy Tajwar Khan.

Descriptions of the podcast can be found in the addendum on pg. 12.

The podcast was such a success that it garnered the attention of NPR and LAist (formerly KPCC). The Human Relations Commission staff is currently in conversation with LAist about Season 3.

### **C. The Forward Together Business Guide for Human Relations**

Commissioner Angelica Solis-Montero, supported by Commissioner Morgan-Greene and Senior Project Coordinator Francisco Ortega, drafted [Forward Together: Building Positive Business-Community Relationships A Framework for Cultural Competency](#). The document is a business guide to Human Relations inspired by the Human Relations project to create a better understanding between the proprietors of Huberts Liquor Store and community members in South Los Angeles' Leimert Park.

The document outlines a framework that supports rebuilding neighborhood economies through respectful, inclusive, and equitable contributions for and by local community members so that all communities in the City of Los Angeles thrive. Specifically, the



framework lifts up the importance of fostering equitable, positive, and sustainable relationships between businesses and the communities in which they operate, by advocating for the creation of a comprehensive and inclusive resource tool.

Recommendations include (1) hiring local community members, (2) reinvesting in community projects and initiatives that align with your business mission statement, (3) becoming civically engaged, (4) using creative placemaking to support community development, (5) getting to know the community, (6) investing in community mediation and conflict resolution interventions, and (7) developing, adopting and implementing a comprehensive human relations training curriculum for business owners.

The Human Relations Commission submitted the business guide to the Mayor's Office. With the guidance of Mayor Garcetti's economic development team, the HRC decided to host a final meeting with the community leaders that participated in the initial dinner leadership dialogues to share out the document. The team also discussed putting the document into a visually appealing template and posting it on the department's website.

#### **D. Forward Together Symposium**

Led by Commissioners Rosa Russell and Courtney Morgan-Greene, in partnership with President Pro Tem Mike Davis, Department of Public Works, the Forward Together Symposium took place on April 28, 2022, and included a fascinating series of panel discussions by distinguished civic and community leaders. Panel topics included Social and Political Conditions in South Los Angeles, Education, Public Safety, and Human Relations in South Los Angeles, Business Economic Development and Health Care in South Los Angeles, and Rebuilding Los Angeles Forward Together.

The symposium was organized as the following:

- With introductions by Human Relations Commissioners:
  - President Anthony Mack
  - Courtney Morgan-Greene
  - Rosa Russel
  - Angelica Solis-Montero
- The panels were moderated by:
  - Commissioner Mike Davis
  - UCLA Professor Dr. Walter Allen
  - Director of the CSUN Center for Southern California Studies Dr. Boris Ricks
  - Bakewell Media News Correspondent Niele Anderson

- Notable speakers and panelists included:
  - LA Civil Rights General Manager Capri Maddox
  - Former U.S. Congresswoman Yvonne Burke
  - Former LA City Councilmember Nate Holden
  - LAUSD Board Member Dr. George Mc Kenna
  - LAPD Deputy Chief Emada Tingirides
  - Faith and Community Empowerment LA President and Founder Hyepin Im
  - Former LA City Councilmember David Ryu
  - Deputy Mayor Brenda Schockley
  - Charles Drew Medical School President Dr. David Carlisle
  - Los Angeles Urban League President Michael Lawson
  - General Managers and Executive Directors of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, Bureau of Contract Administration, Bureau of Sanitation, Bureau of Engineering, and Bureau of Street Services, among many others.

### **E. Community Events**

Led by Commissioner Rosa Russell, the Human Relations Commission partnered with community stakeholders, meeting weekly to develop a series of community events including a press conference and a concert with food trucks. The success of the concert is a reminder that while it is important to discuss and address these issues head-on, it is just as important to be in, and build, a community together. Getting together to have a party, listen to music, and eat good food is a time-tested way to build community. Community stakeholders expressed a desire to continue meeting to enhance relationships between various stakeholders.

### **F. The Forward Together Public Calendar of Events**

At the request of community partners, Commissioner Brooke Wirschafter quickly and efficiently worked with Francisco Ortega, Mark Pampanin, Tajwar Khan to create an online calendar identifying events happening throughout the city to commemorate the 1992 unrest and met weekly to support these events. The team distributed the calendar widely to community partners and via the LA Civil Rights social media outlets.

### **III. Conclusion**

The Human Relations Commission appreciates the opportunity to explore the legacy of the 1992 Civil Unrest, specifically the relationship between the Black and Korean Communities. While tensions persist, intentional community building is helping to alleviate tensions and there are concrete actionable pathways to move Forward Together. The Human Relations Commission recommends adopting the leadership dialogue recommendations, producing a third season of the LA Together Podcast, and creating and disseminating a human relations business guide/curriculum.

## **Addendum: Podcast Descriptions**

The well-produced, high-quality, and polished podcast contains powerful content and is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and all other major podcast distributors. Season 1 of The Forward Together Podcast was well-received by City and community partners and immediately led to the development of a second season.

### Episode 1: Faith (Released April 29)

The first episode featured a conversation between two friends whose bond was built in the aftermath of 1992. Reverend “J” Edgar Boyd, Pastor of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church of Los Angeles (FAME), and Emile Mack, a retired firefighter and current Vice-President of the Korean American Federation of Los Angeles (KAFLA), explored the realities of building solidarity, and what it means to forge a path forward between the Black and the Korean American communities.

### Episode 2: Memory (Released May 2)

This episode featured artist Victoria Cassinova, who painted the mural of Latasha Harlins at L.A.’s Algin Sutton Park, and celebrated filmmaker Justin Chon who directed “*Pachinko*” and “*Gook*” (which takes place against the backdrop of the 1992 unrest). Together these two artists, who had never met before, quickly found a common bond in their struggles to depict the events of 1992 for a new generation.

### Episode 3: Healing (Released May 5)

This episode featured a conversation between two friends raised in the aftermath of the 1992 Civil Unrest. Activist Haewon Asfaw, who is Black and Korean and one of the founding members of Black Lives Matter LA, and therapist Gonji Lee, who describes herself as a Korean queer femme child of immigrants who specializes in intergenerational trauma, shared their stories about growing up in the aftermath of the civil unrest, how they see Los Angeles grappling with racial injustice today, and how they are fostering healing, hope, and solidarity in the next generation.

Season 2 of the podcast, rebranded as “LA Together,” was a five-episode series featuring intimate conversations between Angelenos on some of the greatest issues of our time. Commissioner Stacy Twilley again hosted and executive produced the series in partnership with the Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism under the leadership of Dean Willow Bay and Professor Willa Seidenberg. Commissioner Morgan-Greene supported by Commissioner Stacey Twilley and Senior Project Coordinator Francisco Ortega developed the episode topics. The first episode was released on Tuesday, February 7, 2023, and the following four Tuesdays.

Episode 1: [A Soldiers Home](#) (Released February 7, 2023):

This episode featured a conversation between two veterans discussing their struggles with homelessness and their attempts to access care and seek reform at the Veterans Home in Brentwood.

Episode 2: [The Main Ingredient](#) (Released February 14, 2023):

This episode explored what it is really like for immigrants working in the professional kitchens of Los Angeles, as they are the backbone of the city's 30,000+ restaurants. This episode took a deep dive into the lives of two immigrant restaurateurs.

Episode 3: [Trans Kids](#) (Released February 21, 2023):

The episode highlighted how being transgender in America is not only difficult, but coming out as a transgender child is even harder. In the face of shifting identities, political battles, and issues of belonging, the episode asked the question: What is it like for a transgender child to come out in LA? Listeners joined a conversation between Eden Luna, of the Los Angeles Transgender Advisory Council, and Anne, the parent of seven-year-old twins, about the experiences of transgender children and their upbringing in today's society.

Episode 4: [Dodger Blues](#) (Released February 28, 2023):

This episode explored how many Angelenos have a unique story tied to the famous Dodger Stadium yet underneath the iconic baseball stadium is an often-overlooked history of community resilience, pain, eminent domain, failed promises of public housing, forced removal, and the erasure of three thriving Mexican American communities - Palo Verde, La Loma, and Bishop. Two direct descendants of people displaced by Dodger Stadium shared their traumatic family histories of being forcibly removed from Palo Verde.

Episode 5: [The Original Angelenos](#) (Released March 27, 2023):

This episode should be mandatory listening for everyone in Los Angeles; it features a conversation between two leaders from the LA City & County Native American Indian Commission as they shared who the First People of (what is now called) Los Angeles were. The past, present, and future of the Tongva and Tataviam tribes, the Indigenous people of Southern California, is of central focus to this conversation.