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August 12, 2005

latimes.com : California : The State

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Renewed Focus on Watts' Lessons

At the flashpoint of the 1965 riots, Councilwoman Hahn says: 'We have a long way to go.' Villaraigosa names aide to expedite inner-city projects.

By Patrick McGreevy and Jessica Gresko, Times Staff Writers

For Edward Lee Byrd, the anniversary conjured up images of piling into the back of his family's car with his sisters to see what rioting had done to Watts and of the armored vehicles that stopped their trip.

For James Wilkerson, the observance of the riots 40 years ago reminded him of speeding down charred city streets, past looters, burned vehicles and window signs declaring "Brother's Business," to see if his own small shop had been destroyed.

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And for Councilwoman Janice Hahn, whose father narrowly survived an official tour of the urban unrest when his car was attacked, the commemoration reminded her of just how much and just how little has changed in 40 years.

Gathering at the same intersection — 116th Street and Avalon Boulevard — that served as the flashpoint for the 1965 riots, residents, officials and community leaders offered recollections and regrets Thursday for a part of Los Angeles that continues to suffer disproportionately from poverty and violence.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa was there with Hahn, who held up a 40-year-old photograph of the car that her father, the late county Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, drove into the neighborhood. The windshield was smashed by rioters.

The mayor announced a series of initiatives aimed at improving life in South Los Angeles.

"We have a long way to go to end violence in this community and give hope that there really is a life worth living and it's right here in Watts," said Hahn, who was 13 at the time and now represents Watts.

Sparked by the arrest of Marquette Frye by a California Highway Patrol officer, the riots lasted nearly a week, left 34 people dead and more than 600 buildings damaged or destroyed. For many residents, Thursday passed like any other day, although memories of the turmoil remained vivid.

"I was riding down the street with my mom and my stepdad, and armored tanks were coming down the street," Byrd, 47, said as he stood outside a hamburger stand three blocks from 116th and Avalon. "They were going to loot and I was riding along."

But once his parents saw the tanks, Byrd said, "they turned around and went back home."

Wilkerson, 77, and his wife were vacationing in Mexico when the riots erupted. They cut their trip short, and Wilkerson recalled speeding down Imperial Highway to his poultry shop.

"Cars were turned up, cars were burning, they were throwing bottles and rocks," he said.

But Wilkerson's business was spared, perhaps because people knew a black man owned it, he said Thursday, a day he spent working at the Watts Senior Citizens Center.

Frankie Hines, 69, was playing cards at the center Thursday, when her son came in. Keith Hines, 48, remembered his mother's reaction when she found out that her husband had looted a liquor store with friends.

"My mom was going off at my father," Hines said. She shouted, "You teaching those kids wrong!"

Frankie Hines recalled that after the rioting quieted, the streets looked like a tornado had blown through and strewn store goods about.

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"They say it was better after that," Hines said. She said she wonders if that is true, but she is certain of one thing: "It was never the same."

But to Villaraigosa, too little has changed.

"Here we are 40 years later and there is still so much work to do," he said. "Forty years later the schools in this part of town are among the lowest achieving anywhere in the city. Forty years later the unemployment rate is among the highest of anywhere in the city."

The mayor appointed businesswoman and community activist Denise Fairchild as his special advisor for South Los Angeles Investment Initiatives. Fairchild said she is dropping her candidacy for City Council to take the consultant's position.

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