

FRIDAY, APRIL 28, 2017

PERSPECTIVE

25 years after the LA riots

By Angela Powell

It was April 29, 1992, and Los Angeles was on fire. The spark? A not-guilty verdict for the four Los Angeles Police Department officers who had been charged with assault and the use of unreasonable and excessive force on Rodney King.

For the African-American community, the sense of outrage was not just because of that verdict; it was the belief that now, even if caught on tape, no one would ever believe that the police would use unreasonable force against you simply because of your race. A sentiment that had been deeply held in the African-American community for decades and the hope was that finally the community would get justice.

As a child, I once stood in my family's front window, unable to figure out why a cross was on fire in our front yard. All my mother could say was that "some people simply will hate you because of the color of your skin." Still that message would not resonate until, as a young college student, I saw the city ablaze like that cross.

So where are we 25 years later? Police agencies are becoming even more transparent in an effort to strengthen the trust of the communities they serve. The use of bodyworn and dash cameras gives the public a glimpse into police work. However, with this comes an added responsibility by the media to help the public understand one split second encounter. You have to wonder why as a society we give more deference Monday morning to a quarterback's snap decision on the field than to those who have to make a life and death decision in a lot less time.

I have spent nearly 20 years in-



LAPD officers in riot gear advanced along the south lawn of City Hall in Downtown L.A. during the first night of the Rodney King Riots on April 29, 1992 in Los Angeles.

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teracting with law enforcement. I started as a prosecutor with the Los Angeles County's district attorney's office, where I worked hand in hand with police officers. I then worked as a plaintiff's lawyer, and vigorously cross examined police officers in lawsuits I brought against them for claims of excessive force. And now, as a defense attorney, I have been in the unique and proud position to counsel and represent hundreds of police officers. Litigation is a sobering experience and reveals vulnerabilities that even the most venerable police officers find difficult to embrace. It is in those moments that I have come to learn that at the core of most police officers is a deep desire to make the community they patrol a better place. When they leave home in the morning, they want nothing more than to return home safely at the end of the day. Regardless of the number of years served or lives saved, if an officer

has a fatal encounter, every television set, media outlet and social media platform labels them as a racist and demands the resignation of the badge that officer so proudly wore and defended.

Police officers are tasked with an extremely difficult and often thankless job. The work that they do to protect the communities they serve is not glamorous, and to the average citizen, may even look unjust. There are a lot of complaints that law enforcement has a heavier hand in the African-American community. To that I would say that there is in fact a higher police presence in the African-American community, but unfortunately it is often because the crime rate is disproportionately higher. When you increase police encounters, you will see more arrests and more resistance to arrest; hence the increase in the use of force. Of course there are instances of injustice, but the assumption that all law enforcement officers have an agenda against the African-American community perpetuates a cycle of distrust and unrest.

There is a delicate balance we must strike between the public's desire for transparency and law enforcement officers' need to do their job without the fear that each time

they do it, someone will paint them as racist.

I appreciate the responsibility I have as a voice for law enforcement, particularly because I also understand the needs of people in these communities, who look like me and feel they have no voice. However, as a community, we must also take responsibility. We cannot expect the police to raise our children. On more than one occasion when I met a mother whose son had been shot by the police, I would find that too often, her sadness was because she had lost her son long before that tragic encounter with the police.

The most effective tool to bridge the gap between the community and law enforcement is education. I take every opportunity I get to speak at community forums and on panels to educate communities in what rights they have as citizens and to also understand that there is a time and place to challenge a perceived injustice. In my job as an attorney, I also try to bring more understanding of the communities' needs to the police agencies and officers I counsel.

After all, at the end of the day we all just want to "get along."

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