

Los Angeles Times

April 28, 2012 Saturday
Home Edition

THE L.A. RIOTS: 20 YEARS LATER; In East L.A., a calm

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SECTION: MAIN NEWS; Metro Desk; Part A; Pg. 12

LENGTH: 692 words

Twenty years ago, Times reporter George Ramos was asked to write in these pages about his wounded, smoldering city.

"Los Angeles, you broke my heart," he wrote. "And I'm not sure I'll love you again."

Then he went home to the Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles neighborhoods where he was born and raised. He drove along Whittier Boulevard, Soto Street and other streets, "looking for reassurance in familiar places."

To his great relief, he discovered the 1992 riots didn't impact the Eastside much. Stores closed down, shoppers went home, but there was little looting. All his familiar haunts emerged unscathed, including the First Street Store, with its 16-panel mural depicting Mexican history.

George was proud of the calm in East L.A. during and after the riots. Because for him, the daily rhythms of the community, and the lives of its working people, stood for the goodness of L.A. "Of course...East L.A. is safe," he told people in those unsettled days after the riots. "I'm from there."

This month, I went back to East L.A. in George's stead. He died last year, at 63, and his old stamping grounds seemed like the best place to channel his voice.

Next door to the home on Record Street where he grew up, I found a collection of wood-frame buildings still clinging to the grassy hillside where George once played as a boy.

"It's gotten better, 100 percent better," Art Aguilar, 40, said when I asked how the neighborhood's doing. "All the gang violence calmed down." As for L.A. in general, he added: "Since Magic Johnson bought the Dodgers, it's going to be way better."

Yes, they love their baseball on the Eastside. George did too, but he hated the Dodgers with a passion -- he never forgave them for leveling the Chavez Ravine neighborhood to build their stadium.

George held on to L.A. history in that stubborn, almost tragic way we L.A. natives tend to do.

But East L.A. has always been a very young community. And even 1992 seemed like ancient history last week when I visited. Down on nearby Hammel Street, I found someone who remembered 1992.

"I was working in a parking lot downtown," Alberto Gonzalez, 60, said in Spanish. He was a newly arrived immigrant then. "We shut everything down and got out of there." Armed merchants took to the roofs nearby.

Dozens of small groceries and liquor stores burned down, but four years later Gonzalez opened one of his own: Gonzalez Grocery.

Selling milk and potato chips, he raised a family and became a U.S. citizen.

"I personally can't complain," he told me as he tended to a steady stream of customers. "Everything I set out to do, I accomplished."

There's a comforting, austere constant to life on the Eastside. The homes around the Gonzalez Grocery are not palaces, but most have rose bushes and blossoming fruit trees. Inside the store, Gonzalez still gives credit to his cash-strapped customers.

And if you ask someone to reflect on life, chances are they'll still come up with a Spanish aphorism.

"La carga hace andar al burro," Gonzalez said. The load makes the donkey walk. He's got so many family responsibilities and debts, Gonzalez explained, he can't afford to quit working.

Down on 1st Street, Korean immigrant Daniel Oh said something similar. "I lose money if I stay open," he told me. "And I lose if I close." So he keeps on going, even though his discount store is nearly bankrupt.

Oh's neighbor, the First Street Store, closed in 2007. Ever since, fewer people have come to shop at his store. Several other businesses closed. It's as if a mob of economists and bankers rioted in the neighborhood: Foreclosures and unemployment brought the kind of destruction looters never did.

East L.A. is in crisis. And yet East L.A. perseveres.

The First Street Store is empty, but activists are fighting to save its murals.

Back on Hammel Street, I saw a young boy blissfully unaware of any crisis, past or present. It was a breezy day, and he was trying to fly a kite in a narrow driveway. Every now and then, the wind kicked up enough to lift the kite over his head.

If George Ramos could come back here, I'm sure he'd say: L.A., I love you again.

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LOAD-DATE: April 28, 2012

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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