

NEVER FORGOTTEN

Community pays tribute to Latasha Harlins 25 years after her death

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SOUTH LOS ANGELES — The memory of Latasha Harlins was recalled March 16, 25 years after her death — a killing that served as one of the touchstones of the 1992 riots in South Los Angeles.

Harlins was a 15-year-old girl killed by a Korean liquor store owner over a \$1.79 bottle of orange juice.

On the site of the former liquor store, now a Numero Uno grocery store, family members, friends and community activists gathered to pay tribute to Harlins' memory in what Najee Ali, political director of the National Action Network, said was a "very emotional and moving" memorial.

Ali spoke at the memorial, as did Denise Harlins, Latasha's aunt.

"We're not here to remember Latasha," Ali said. "Our community will never forget Latasha."

Latasha Harlins entered the Empire Liquor Market at the intersection of 91st and Figueroa streets on her way to school on March 16, 1991.

She grabbed a bottle of



Denise Harlins, the aunt of Latasha Harlins, speaks March 16 at a memorial to her niece, held at the site of death 25 years ago at Figueroa and 91st streets. Latasha Harlins was 15 when she was killed by a Korean shop owner who accused her of trying to steal a bottle of orange juice.

Courtesy photo

orange juice and put it in her backpack while she reached into her clothes for money to pay for it.

The store owner, Soon Ja Du, a Korean immigrant, accused Harlins of trying to steal the bottle.

Du grabbed the girl's sweater and Harlins turned around and punched her in the face, knocking Du to the ground. Harlins then threw the orange juice on the counter and walked toward the door.

The storeowner picked up a handgun under the counter and shot Harlins in the back of the head, killing her instantly.

The death of Harlins intensified the bad feelings between Korean merchants and African-American residents that already existed.

But what made the situation worse for the community was the sentence handed down by Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Joyce Karlin after a jury convicted Du of voluntary manslaughter in Harlins' death.

Karlin could have sentenced Du to 16 years in prison. Instead, she put her on probation, sentencing her to 400 hours of community service and a \$500 fine.

"This shows how black

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lives are continually devalued," Ali said, 25 years later, calling the case a precursor to the deaths of Ezell Ford, Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, young blacks killed in confrontations with the police in the case of Brown and Ford, and a neighborhood vigilante in the case of Martin.

Denise Harlins also touched on that theme as she spoke to those gathered on the site last week. Referring to her granddaughter and grandson who were present, Harlins said: "I want to see them grow. I want to see them have

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— Denise Harlins

munity and the Korean immigrants who came and established businesses in primarily black neighborhoods, starting around the early 1980s. Harlins' murder and the subsequent ruling was "the straw that broke the camel's back."

For their part, Korean merchants

A few weeks before Latasha's death, the video showing LAPD officers beating Rodney King surfaced.

The acquittal of four LAPD officers accused of assaulting him under the color of authority, along with Du's sentence, sparked six days of widespread looting, assault and arson,

longed to Korean immigrants, including Du's store.

"The majority of Koreans stood in support of [Harlins'] murderer, but they paid the price during the L.A. Riots," Ali said.

Though Harlins did not achieve the same iconic status of Rodney King,

"The next generation of Korean business owners took the time to learn customers' names and began to hire local people to work in businesses," Ali said. "It's also the small things that make a difference, like putting change in patrons' hands instead of throwing it on the counter."

Denise Harlins called on people of all backgrounds to unite against discrimination in any form.

"People are walking around in deep pain," she said. "We've got all this racism and hate going on. People are being pitted against each other. Support