

*Building Bridges between Races:
Kyung Won Lee, Investigative Journalist*

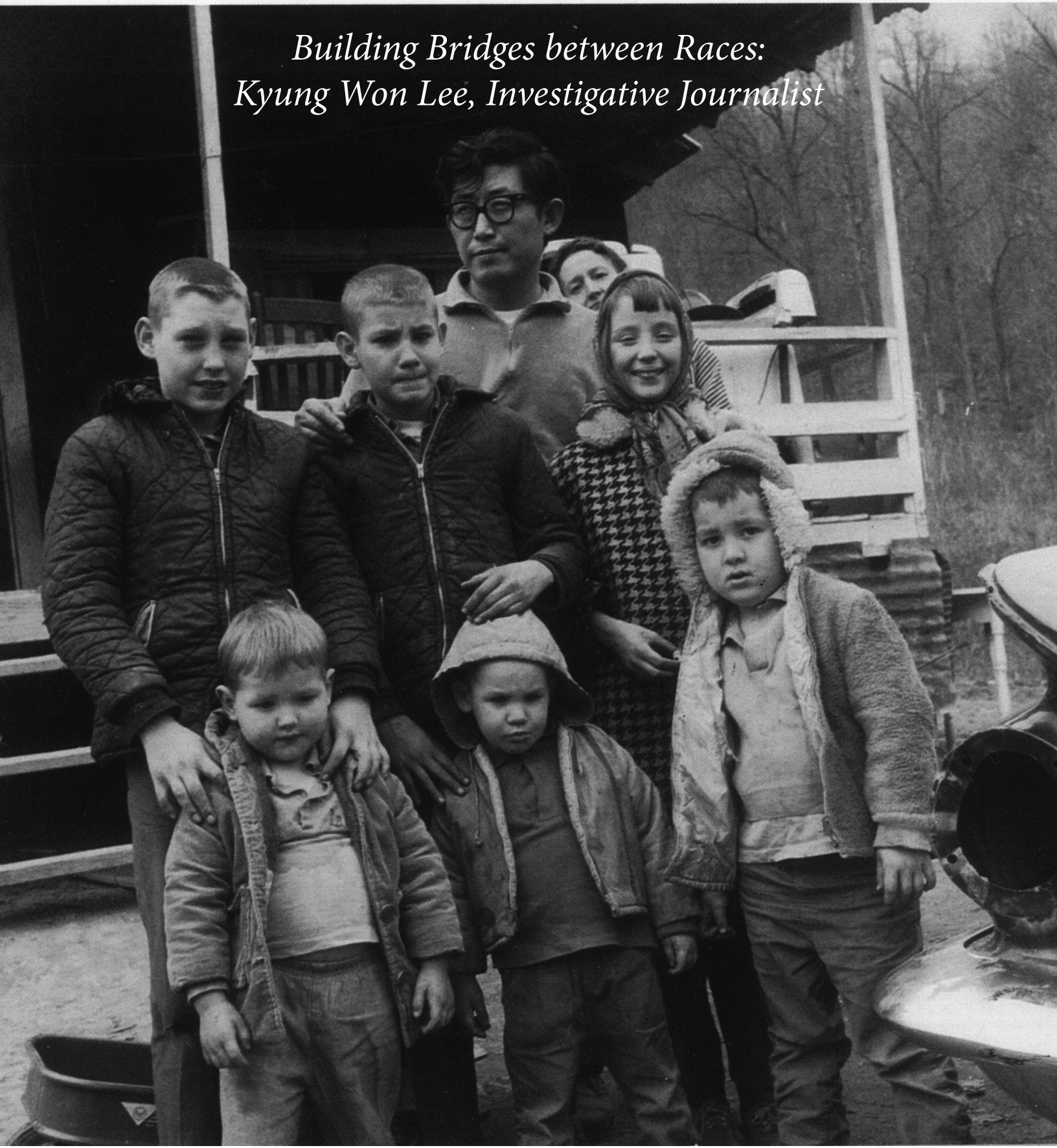


Photo: K.W. Lee in 1969, reporting on daily accounts of a West Virginia family's life on isolated Doctors Creek.

PHOTO COURTESY OF K.W. LEE

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ANGELA OH

K.W. Lee is a Man Who Moves My Heart

My heart was moved from the very first time I heard him speaking out against injustice around the Chol Soo Lee case in the 1970s. Subsequently, I heard and read K.W. Lee speaking and writing about immigration and labor issues in the 1980s, and, in 1992, about the Los Angeles Rebellion, that unfairly pitted minorities against one another.

I think that K.W. Lee has always been a man who breaks barriers and builds bridges: between African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, between rich and poor, between those inside and outside of prisons, and between generations — those born in America and those from other lands. In fact, K.W. thinks of *our* futures — together. It is K.W. Lee's capacity to extend himself beyond his individual soul and profession, and to reach out to others in diverse communities, that distinguishes him — maverick, award-winning investigative journalist — from so many others. From the 1950s when he first immigrated to the U.S., K.W. has been a pathbreaking journalist, reporter, and editor.

In K.W. Lee's view, the Korean American community is at the threshold of a new era in which "a community conscience" is forming. These Korean Americans, many of them a younger generation, find themselves working in labor struggles for both Asians and Latinos, of becoming part of multicultural civil rights organizations, or involved in community non-profit agencies to improve the lives of all people within the Los Angeles community.

K.W. Lee believes in this multiracial, pluralistic future. And this is the foundation of the hope he continues to express — the hope he will never let die.

A Journalist's Journey toward Justice

In 1950, at the age of 21, K.W. Lee arrived in the United States, having studied English literature while at Korea University. Like so many students who arrived in America after the Korean war, K.W. Lee believed he would finish his studies and return to

Korea to help run an English newspaper in the post Korean war era, building on the strong sense of cultural nationalism he felt. His dreams of returning to Korea never materialized. Instead, he found himself in the midst of another struggle in the heart of the United States — the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.

Breaking Color Barriers — before the Civil Rights Movement

As a young reporter employed in the South a decade before the start of the 1960s civil rights movement, K.W. Lee had the chance to confront the color-line in local news reporting. He wrote about four young African American high school graduates who dared to ask to be acknowledged in connection with their scholastic achievements in the local newspaper in the southern town of Kingsport, Tennessee.

Koreans in the U.S.

The United States is a nation of immigrants. One of latest and fastest growing ethnic communities in the United States is that of the Korean Americans. The Korean immigrant experience in the U.S. can be traced back one hundred years but it is only since 1965 that the numbers have been substantial.

From the very beginnings of the United States anti-Asian attitudes were present. The Act of 1790 prevented Asian immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens. The Nationality Origins Act in 1924 declared all persons born of Asian ancestry were barred to immigrate because they were ruled ineligible to become American citizens. In 1952 the passage of the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act allowed Korea and Japan each an annual quota of 100 people who could immigrate to America. The law also allowed alien residents of Korean ancestry in America the right for naturalization, thus ending the discriminatory law of naturalization based on race and ethnic origin.

In 1965, the Immigration Act abolished the quota system that had restricted the numbers of Asians allowed to enter the United States. Large numbers of Koreans, including some from the North that have come via South Korea, have been immigrating ever since, putting Korea in the top five countries of origin of immigrants to the United States since 1975. The reasons for immigration include the desire for increased freedom, especially for women, and the hope for better economic opportunities.

Later, in Appalachia, he challenged those who sought profit, trading on the lives of working people and their families, by illuminating the problem of black lung disease among coal miners of Appalachia.

As a cub reporter at the crusading *Charleston Gazette* in West Virginia, K.W. Lee was assigned to cover the marches and protests that were organized in the Appalachian south by blacks seeking to end racial discrimination. He recalls “In Appalachia I saw poverty, despair and corruption eyeball to eyeball. Disenfranchised mountain folk — both black and white — grew on me. I was assigned to be out in the trenches to open up Jim Crow places — hotels, restaurants and cafes. I was so involved in this thing I didn’t realize until much later that I was courting danger at a time when the old world was on its last stand against the coming new eras.”

“Why was that man wearing a mask?”

Carole Ferrell, who worked for the West Virginia Commission on Human Rights for twenty years, remembers K.W. Lee well:

K.W. was the first American of Asian descent I’d ever met. I was reared in a Southern West Virginia coal mining community, went to segregated schools, and was educated at a historically black college — the occasion to have a relationship with an Asian American in West Virginia was almost nil. I became very conscious of how little my children knew about Asians when my oldest son — then five — met K.W. at my office. Later, my son asked, “Mother, why was that man wearing a mask?”

The “mask” would prove to be the single most important thing that K.W. Lee would dedicate his life to removing. As events would unfold in later years, K.W.



Photos, top: K.W. Lee standing in front yard of one of the two West Virginia families on isolated Doctors Creek with whom he spent days for daily accounts of their life in 1969, with children playing in the background.

Right, K.W. Lee with children of the Bresindine and Zornes families, on front porch of the Bresindine house, with Mrs. Myrtle Zornes partially hidden in the back.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF K.W. LEE



PHOTO COURTESY OF K.W. LEE/ AMERASIA JOURNAL

Photo: K.W. Lee's first 1977 interview with inmate Chol Soo Lee at Deuel State Prison near Stockton, California.

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Lee found that the task of removing the stereotypes, the ignorance, and the bigotry against Korean Americans and Asian Americans was formidable.

When he moved to the West Coast of the United States, he continued his crusade in journalism.

How a Journalist Helped Free Imprisoned Youth

K.W. Lee was the primary reporter who wrote about the Chol Soo Lee case, and spearheaded a pan-Asian movement to free this youth who was unjustly imprisoned for life.

In 1977, K.W. Lee met a prison inmate named Chol Soo Lee. The young Korean immigrant was charged with first-degree murder for stabbing to death another inmate, a reputed neo-Nazi, in a prison yard altercation at Deuel State Prison in Tracy, California. Lee claimed self-defense. At the time of the prison incident, Chol Soo was already serving time

for the murder of reputed gang adviser Yip Yee Tak in San Francisco's Chinatown. The prison killing was prosecuted as a death penalty case with special circumstances under California law due to the fact that Chol Soo was already serving a life-term for murder.

Upon learning of Chol Soo's case, K.W. Lee, then working for the *Sacramento Union*, felt a strong urge to take a closer look — the story did not seem to add up. He wanted to learn more about the case by going straight to the source. He interviewed Chol Soo, obtained authorization to review files, and in so doing, K.W. Lee was convinced that the young Korean immigrant was wrongfully convicted. Thus began the crusade to do everything that could possibly be done to save an innocent man.

With the help of a handful of committed young lawyers and community members, K.W. Lee mounted a national campaign that sparked Korean Americans and others to save the life of Chol Soo Lee. This core team of supporters sought K.W. Lee's help in the case when the prison murder case broke.

The challenge of working across ethnic community lines was enormous. The infrastructure had to be built from the ground up.

The first victory in the campaign came when a Sacramento Superior Court judge granted Chol Soo Lee's request for a new trial in 1979. Then, in 1982, in the retrial of the Chinatown case, a San Francisco jury acquitted Chol Soo Lee of the first murder conviction, and his prison murder conviction was nullified on appeal. Then, in 1983, Chol Soo was finally free, after spending ten years in prison (eight of those years in solitary confinement and four of those years on death row).

Utilizing Media to Build a Community: Koreatown Weekly

In 1979, K.W. Lee took on the role of editor-publisher of the English-language newspaper, *Koreatown Weekly*. It was an opportunity to meet and mentor young Korean American journalists, many of whom view K.W. Lee as the icon of their profession. But K.W. Lee did not limit opportunities at his weekly to Korean Americans; rather, he encouraged writers of other ethnic backgrounds to explore newly unfolding developments that *Koreatown Weekly* covered.

For four years, until 1982, this newspaper focused on creating a media to serve a new, emerging multiethnic and bilingual society. K.W. Lee foresaw the importance of reaching out to the emerging 1.5 Korean generation (those born in Korea but raised in America) and a growing U.S.-born 2.0, or second, generation.

The L.A. Rebellion/Riots, May 1992 Challenges a Reporter

Background

In 1991, the beating of Rodney King, an African American, by four LAPD officers was caught on video. The officers went on trial and on April 29, 1992, twelve jurors in Sylmar, California, delivered their verdicts in the controversial case. The case had received heavy media coverage when a video of the beating hit the national airwaves. The verdicts came as a complete surprise: One of the officers was found guilty of excessive force; the other officers were cleared of all charges.

The “mask” would prove to be the single most important thing that K.W. Lee would dedicate his life to removing. As events would unfold in later years, K.W. found that the task of removing the stereotypes, the ignorance, and the bigotry against Korean Americans and Asian Americans was formidable.

K.W. Lee called the L.A. Rebellion of 1992 “America’s first media-fanned urban mob assault on a hapless tribe of newcomers with no voice or clout.”

The verdicts were broadcast live, and anger spread throughout the city. For three days the city experienced widespread devastation. Approximately 3,600 fires were set, destroying 1,100 buildings. This proved to be the most destructive civil unrest since 1965. The final tally:

- More than 50 killed
- Over 4,000 injured, 12,000 people arrested
- \$1 billion in property damage (Korean American businesses lost \$425 million of that amount).

K.W. Lee called the L.A. Rebellion of 1992 “America’s first media-fanned urban mob assault on a hapless tribe of newcomers with no voice or clout.” The spring of 1992, commonly known as the L.A. Rebellion or L.A. Riots was a season of tragedy for African Americans, Latinos, Korean Americans, and others living in Los Angeles. Koreans across the globe were shaken when the looting, vandalism, and arson left more than 2,500 immigrant families stripped down to nothing.

K.W.’s Contributions Recognized

The 1990s was a period of high unemployment, poor police/community relations, no investment in the city’s infrastructure, and major high profile cases involving African American victims of crime and non-African American defendants.

K.W. Lee sensed an escalating tension in South Central Los Angeles. He quickly recruited a young, multi-ethnic staff, mostly fresh out of college, and launched the *Korea Times* English-language weekly in 1990. By 1992, K.W. Lee was in the hospital, his health had been failing him and his liver reached its end stage of deterioration due to the hepatitis B virus. As he waited for a new liver, Los Angeles imploded. The fuse — the verdict in the Rodney King trial.

K.W. Lee’s efforts during this critical period was recognized by Los Angeles County. In 1992, he was among 13 individuals honored by the L.A. County Human Relations Commission. He was recognized for “promoting intergroup relations, through journalism and through community involvement, using genuine portrayals of real people to foster genuine understanding.” The following is K.W. Lee’s speech in accepting the award:

Understanding Word Connotation

The 1992 upheaval in Los Angeles is described by several terms: LA Riots, LA Rebellion, LA Uprising.

What does the selection of one term over another reveal?

“Six months have elapsed, since the four days of fire, fury and madness. We Korean Americans in the Southland still remain stunned, bewildered, confused, abandoned and terribly lost.

Few ethnic minorities have been so devastated with such a blow since World War II, singled out for destruction as the newest scapegoat for all the ills — imagined or real — of the murderous inner cities of our country.

It’s been the year of our economic Holocaust. Almost every member of my people, nearly a quarter million immigrants in the Southland, have been decimated by this madness and calamity. It’s as if we have committed an unpardonable crime of being born Korean. We look up to heaven and ask, “Why us, why Korean American, why Koreatown?”

The history of newcomers from Korea is as young, fledgling and innocent as 15-year-old Latasha Harlins, but it is literally being written in blood, tears and sweat.

Each day, a new chapter unfolds.

And my small newspaper is here to chronicle their struggle, telling the untold story of our people — with warts and all — in their full human context, not only for the outsiders, but for our future generations.

The impact of the local media’s race mongering has been instantaneous and devastating when it comes to our relationship with our black brothers and sisters, especially in South Central. Even before they had a chance to know each other — who they are, where they’ve been and their common struggle of the past — both Korean Americans and African Americans were pitted against each other in the local media as enemies in the shouting sound bites and the screaming headlines.

And our newspaper has been trying our damndest to undo the accumulated neglects and wrongs of the past years, but it’s like a cry in the wilderness, a whisper in the wind.

Internally, our paper is also developing an ongoing dialogue among the diverse and disparate elements of my subterranean community — between children and their parents, the Korean-born and the American-born, the newcomers, the latecomers and the early comers.

But the Korean-speaking parents and the English-speaking children seem to march to their own drums. It’s like two ships passing each other in a dark night without even exchanging a signal. This is our particular sorrow.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF K.W. LEE

Photos, from above: K.W. Lee reunited in 2000 in Charleston with the Rev. Homer Davis, who led sustained civil rights struggles in West Virginia in the 1960s in alliance with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Middle: reunited with civil rights activist Carole Ferrell in front of the California state capitol in 2000.

Bottom: K.W. and his Korea Times Weekly staff reporters in a get together with Los Angeles Sentinel staffers in South Central L.A. in 1991, a year prior to the L.A. Riots, as part of the “Good Neighbor Exchange” program.

“Again, when it comes to relations with our ethnic brothers and sisters, we try to adhere to the highest standards of accuracy, fairness and balanced reporting. Every copy is being scrutinized because we know lives and limbs and livelihoods are at stake.”

Above all, my paper is committed to serving as a bridge to our ethnic brothers and sisters. And we have run hundreds of stories about Korean merchants trying to live as good neighbors in the non-Korean neighborhoods.

We have also taken the initiative of having exchanges with such respected newspapers as the Los Angeles Sentinel, Jewish Journal, Rafu Shimpo and others. We have visited our counterparts in South Central to get to know them. Their columns and editorials grace our newspaper most regularly.



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Photos: top, Korean-owned shops burn during the 1992 Los Angeles Riots in Koreatown, April 30, 1992. Right, hundreds rally for peace in Koreatown.



Photo: K.W. addressing the huge crowd that packed Seoul International Park in the heart of Koreatown during the 10th anniversary rally of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots.

“My new liver may have belonged to an African American or a Latino or an Anglo. What does it matter? We are all entangled in an unbroken human chain of interdependence and mutual survival.”

Again, when it comes to relations with our ethnic brothers and sisters, we try to adhere to the highest standards of accuracy, fairness and balanced reporting. Every copy is being scrutinized because we know the lives and limbs and livelihoods are at stake.

May 2nd, the day after the three days of burning and looting, was our finest moment.

While the buildings along the streets were still smoldering, a sea of more than 30,000 Korean Americans, young and old with their children, held the largest Asian American demonstration of peace in this nation’s history.

Young and old alike, with (Anglo) African American and Latino supporters, marched while chanting for peace and racial harmony.

It was our glorious Martin Luther King Day. And we shall overcome hatred and fear, the mother of all violence. It was the day the torch also was passed to our American-born, English-speaking children, our second generation.

And the Korean Americans are no longer here as sojourners or guests. We are here to live and die in the urban trenches because we have given so much of ourselves and gained so much in freedom in return.

This is our last home on this Earth.

On a final and very personal note, may I add that I believe in the resurrection of the City of Angels.

You are looking at a living and breathing example of the magic miracles performed quietly in this so-called never-never land of murder, mayhem and madness. I am recovering from a recent liver transplant operation at the UCLA Medical Center, where hundreds of health care people of all colors are bound together to save fragile human lives from the terminal diseases with transplants.

My new liver may have belonged to an African American or a Latino or an Anglo. What does it matter? We are all entangled in an unbroken human chain of interdependence and mutual survival.

And what really matters is that we all belong to each other during our earthly passage.”