

CONCLUSION

Los Angeles cannot afford to squander its precious human capital or to allow community polarization to undermine its social and economic well-being. In a diverse and evolving city, developing positive human relations requires a sustained commitment by a number of public and private institutions and individuals. Unfortunately, attention to human relations in Los Angeles has often been short-lived and crisis-driven. As Genethia Hudley Hayes, President of the LA Unified School Board observed, “We do things in times when we are in high anxiety, when we are in high confusion, when we are in states of high embarrassment.” She urged the Human Relations Commission to continue to consider, “How do we manage [our] diversity, and can we do it when we are not in a state of crisis?” Los Angeles’ own history attests that cities must prepare for human relations emergencies just as they prepare for natural disasters. A proactive human relations strategy requires up-to-date information on changing conditions that are likely to affect human relations, a dispute resolution team that may be deployed to

defuse particularly severe intergroup tensions, and a network of local leaders who understand the value of positive human relations.


Rapid demographic shifts have transformed Los Angeles into one of the most demographically diverse cities in the world. Despite the social and economic strengths this incredible diversity brings to the city, it has also inevitably entailed tension and conflict as disparate cultural, religious, and ethnic groups struggle to establish their presence in the social, economic, and political life of Los Angeles. In a recent book on the changing social fabric of California, William Clark argues, “Our nation must accommodate the changing multiethnic complexity so that the state of California and the United States retain their identity as one society with many ethnic backgrounds and identities, rather than divide into separate ethnic and racial societies sharing a common territory but holding only weak loyalties to the nation as a whole.”³⁶

Los Angeles has already begun the process of accommodating the dramatic changes in the city’s social fabric. Many

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Genethia Hudley Hayes
President of the
LA Unified School Board
August 2, 1999 Testimony before the
Human Relations Commission.





who testified before the Human Relations Commission spoke compellingly about continued discrimination in housing, employment, the media, education, policing, and the justice system. Witnesses described the corrosive effect of hate crimes, the endurance of segregated residential enclaves, and the fierce competition among ethnic groups for jobs, housing, and cultural dominance. This testimony provides considerable cause for concern. Fortunately, the Commission's community focus groups, teen summit, and public hearings also confirm that mutual understanding, respect, and inclusion are worthwhile goals for Los Angeles to pursue. Opportunities that are regularly taken for granted today were impossible dreams only thirty or forty years ago. Restrictive housing covenants barred African Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Jews, and other groups from living in many parts of Los Angeles. Racially discriminatory policies kept women, African Americans, Latinos, and others from jobs in the city police force, fire department, and civil service. Although discrimination and other human relations problems persist, discrimination has not prevented Angelenos of all backgrounds from enjoying economic success, political advancement, and social well-being. Small businesses owned by Asians, Latinos, African Americans, as well as non-Latino whites, spearheaded the recovery from the severe recession of the early 1990s and are now critical for Southern California's economic growth.

It is imperative that the city build on the progress that has already been made. Los Angeles' community colleges and four-year universities train the region's diverse workforce. In programs like Shoulder-to-Shoulder, young people from different neighborhoods and different backgrounds work together in community service activities. Community organizations, religious institutions, and civic groups are bridging intergroup divisions and forging long-term relationships. Perhaps most encouraging is the willingness of ordinary people to think seriously and speak candidly about human relations in Los Angeles. Most participants in the Commission's focus groups and youth dialogues reported that they enjoyed participating in a dialogue on human relations, and many expressed a strong interest in helping to build a more cohesive community. None of this should be taken as cause for complacency, but great progress should be noted and the possibility of further progress embraced.

During the first several years of the new millennium, the Commission will help move Los Angeles toward better human relations. Consistent with the recommendations offered during the public hearings, the Commission's activities will focus on three areas: monitoring intergroup tension, building capacity to intervene in intergroup conflict, and expanding opportunities for constructive civic engagement.

The Human Relations Commission's Field Team and Response Unit will work with universities and local organizations to gather critical information about community resources, economic development strategies, government services, and demographic changes in Los Angeles' many neighborhoods. This data will enable the Commission and others to more effectively predict and respond to intergroup tension and conflict including discrimination and hate crimes. The database will also help the Mayor, City Council, other city departments, businesses, and community organizations better understand and serve Los Angeles.

Los Angeles' new neighborhood councils offer an excellent opportunity to strengthen human relations across the city. Neighborhood councils should empower local communities throughout the city, many of which today feel disenfranchised when key decisions are made on land use, planning, housing, education, public safety, parks, and other city services. Neighborhood councils will also provide the Commission with information about the city's changing communities. Working through the neighborhood councils, the Commission's Field Team and Response Unit will develop liaisons with religious groups, civic associations, economic development groups, and other neighborhood-based groups. Knowledge of neighborhood dynamics and established contacts in the city's neighborhoods will enable the Commission's Field Team and Response Unit to assume a more proactive role in easing intergroup tensions. The Human Relations Commission has also begun to develop a model for intervening in complex, multi-party conflicts that it plans to apply in future conflicts. In several high-profile conflicts at Los Angeles high schools, Commission staff gathered information, assembled a team of experienced mediators, met with all parties to identify issues in dispute, conducted mediation sessions, facilitated meetings at which mediation agreements were signed, and monitored the terms of the agreements. The Commission will refine and implement this intervention model in future community conflicts involving ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, religion, or disability.

As we begin a new century, efforts to expand civic engagement form the cornerstone of the Commission's work. An expanded Shoulder-to-Shoulder program will enable more elementary through high school students of diverse backgrounds to discover their similarities and to develop intercultural fluency. The experience of working together will promote better human relations among the next generation of civic leaders. The Commission will also work closely with the new Department of Neighborhood Empowerment and the neighborhood councils to cultivate grassroots leaders, engage a broader cross section of residents in civic affairs, and nurture intergroup collaboration. In the coming years, the Human Relations Commission will take a leading role in convening public officials, business leaders, and community representatives to share information about issues affecting human relations in Los Angeles, formulate solutions to collective problems, and strengthen community solidarity. Finally, the Human Relations Commission will focus public attention on some of the successful intergroup collaborations at work throughout this city so that these examples may guide and inspire other businesses and organizations to transcend divisions caused by prejudice, competition, and inequality.

Even as Los Angeles has experienced a dramatic demographic transformation, Los Angeles begins the new century having made great strides in human relations. Further progress toward a more understanding, respectful, and inclusive city is not only possible but also necessary as Los Angeles continues to change. There is every reason for optimism — and a critical need to turn that hope into reality in the years ahead.

