Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Los Angeles Loves Levi Kingston

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, March 4th, 2020

On Tuesday February 25th, Los Angeles lost one of its greatest community advocates, Levi L. Kingston, Jr. The 80-year old Kingston was a committed community activist in South Central Los Angeles since the early 1960s. Kingston's influence is so significant that Councilman Curren D. Price of Los Angeles's Ninth District, adjourned the March 3rd City Council meeting in honor of Kingston. The meeting's last 5 minute segment was dedicated to his memory.

Especially known for establishing the Hoover Intergenerational Care (H.I.C.) Center in the USC/Exposition Park neighborhood, Kingston was an advocate of cross cultural awareness with friends in every corner of the city. One of his best friends for over 55 years is City of Quartz author Mike Davis. "Levi was the principal, constant bridge builder in the 1960s between the Bohemian scene, the New Left, and the Black Power generation," Davis says. "When I arrived in LA in June 1965 as a clueless SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) kid, he took me in hand and taught me the city which I still see through his eyes."

Davis is not alone in his praise for Kingston. Adrienne Marks worked with Kingston for close to 40 years. "Levi was a visionary with brilliant ideas that he could plan and successfully execute," Marks says. "A perfect example of this was his development of a community based child care center to serve low and moderate income parents who needed to work or participate in training programs for their families financial sustainability."

Marks tells me that Kingston's forte was synthesizing urban planning, community development, community relations, public policy and neighborhood organizing into practical, direct action. He made it his business to know everyone in the local Exposition Park neighborhood whether it was city employees, USC officials, church ministers, real estate developers, business owners or longtime residents.

Street Outreach: The People on the Ground

Kingston knew politics and policy but he always remembered the people on the ground. During the 1984 Olympics, Marks says, Kingston made sure that community residents were not forgotten about or adversely affected by the neighborhood changes and new developments. He also was one of the first to advocate for public awareness and community outreach as AIDS emerged in the mid 80s.

Kingston was born in Los Angeles and grew up in the Pueblo del Rio housing projects and graduated from Los Angeles High School in 1957. Shortly after high school he travelled around the

world as a merchant seaman. This was a major turning point for Kingston's life. He once told Mike Davis "that growing up in the Pueblo del Rio projects he never knew a white person during his childhood but becoming a seaman introduced him to the cosmopolitan and politically radical world of the merchant navy. He was widely traveled and had an expansive view of humanity and in LA he was everywhere at once. Quite a feat since he never learned to drive."

Kingston was famous for walking all over the city. The most comprehensive account of his accomplishments is a magisterial article written by Lynell George in the 1990s from her first book, No Crystal Stair. George's essay, aptly titled, "I Can Be Reached Here Anytime," follows Kingston moving around the city from USC to city hall to community meetings to neighborhood restaurants. George's essay goes a long way to really show how well Kingston knew LA and why he was so effective as a community organizer. George's essay is compelling on multiple levels and one of the most poignant aspects of it is how she intersperses quotes from Kingston where he explains his methods. For example:

I like grassroots organizing. I mean, it appeals to me. Politically, I believe that organizers must relate to politicians if they see themselves doing anything. They've got to. I am not a purist. I don't believe because politics are 'dirty' you should ignore them. You can't ignore the process. Because you're always in the position to deliver something to people who don't see themselves as having any power.

More than anything Kingston was always about representing for those that needed someone in their corner. George recounts Kingston's strategy where if he went to see a politician or city official or developer and they were not at their office, he would just sit there and wait until they came back. This strategy would work and it was part of why he always got things done. Kingston was a master of street outreach with "roles that shift as community needs present themselves: psychologist, father, friend, patron, doctor, confidant.." George writes. "It's meant being a fixture at City Hall; Santa-in-a-pinch at Christmas time; the resolute force holding the not-so-gentle USC at bay. It's meant quelling worry and panic. It's meant being on call 24/7. It is what Levi Kingston does best."

"His hand was always on the plough and he constantly sowed little miracles," remembers Mike Davis. Kingston will especially be remembered because of his expansive vision. Adrienne Marks notes that he was advocating for intergenerational solutions in public policy years before anyone else — beginning over 40 years ago at the Hoover Intergenerational Care Center. "The primary mission of HIC was created out of research by a graduate student at the USC Andrea School of Gerontology which indicated the significant impact that integrating seniors and young adults into the early education preschool environment would have on the learning process," Marks states.

Bridging Generations

"Levi embraced the intergenerational approach as a solution to effectively teaching preschool children. No one really understood how far ahead he was in his thinking and that into the future which is present-day that the intergenerational approach is the key solution to problems being addressed on a local, national and global level." Moreover, Marks adds that, "The United Nations has established its own intergenerational initiatives to approach social, cultural, political and other issues throughout the world." Prior to Kingston's passing, Marks worked with him to organize a new nonprofit, Intergenerational Advocates for Social and Cultural Change.

Ultimately, Levi Kingston “moved in and around social and political circles, served as a liaison between splintered warring factions,” Lynell George writes. Kingston was also a musician and in addition to his political organizing, he owned a coffeehouse for awhile and he organized a number of multicultural and intergenerational art festivals over the last 50 years.

Kingston’s coffeehouse was a part of a larger multicultural bohemian scene that emerged in Los Angeles in the early 1960s. “Pogo’s Swamp, the coffeehouse Levi owned for a year in 1962 on Melrose at Heliotrope,” wrote George, “entertained a motley community mix — LACC students, Venice beatniks, musicians.” The recently deceased Los Angeles historian Lionel Rolfe knew Kingston and mentioned Pogo’s Swamp and the 1960s coffeehouse scene in his books and the famed Los Angeles poet, Michael C. Ford also wrote about Kingston in poems about that era.

Mike Davis has a new book about Los Angeles in the 1960s that he dedicated to Kingston. Titled Set the Night on Fire and co-authored with Jon Wiener, the book publishes April 14th, 2020 and Davis wishes that Kingston would have had a chance to see it. “I wanted him to see how much I honored and loved him,” Davis recently told me. “I’m too broken up to continue, but we need to think hard about, not just memorializing him, but supporting the work to which gave six decades.”

In addition to the Hoover Intergenerational Care Center, Kingston organized the Hoover Jefferson Stakeholders collaborative that provided community input to the massive USC developments: University Gateway and University Village. He had close ties with the California Science Center, the California African American Museum, the National History Museum and he worked frequently with other community activists like Jackie Dupont-Walker.

I only met Kingston a few times, but the memories remain vivid. I drove him home once on a warm August night in 2011 from an event in the San Fernando Valley over to the Hoover Intergenerational Care Center. Driving on the 110 below Downtown’s illuminated skyscrapers he told me story after story. I wish I would have recorded the conversation. Most of all I remember he talked about how much he loved Los Angeles, his friendship with Mike Davis and what he believed in.

One of the statements Kingston shared with Lynell George really summarizes the spirit of his work: “Law enforcement is not all that it’s cracked up to be in terms of any remedy,” Kingston told George, “and that’s where community organizing becomes an important variable that has rarely been supported. I think that it hasn’t been supported because it’s subversive. Politicians want to control you. Educators want to control you. It’s turf. It means a collective effort. Not just law and order. Not just the church. We have to really come together and implement a plan of action.”

For Levi Kingston — similar to Horace Tapscott, another iconic Angeleno — the plan of action is intergenerational and community based. People are catching on to the power of community organizing that Kingston describes above because in recent years dozens of nonprofit organizations across Los Angeles have emerged comprised of young activists. Groups like Community Coalition and leaders like the late great Nipsey Hussle have embodied the cooperation and self determination that Kingston stood for.

Kingston is survived by his son Ian Kingston and close colleagues of his like Adrienne Marks continue his work. Marks speaks for us all when she says: “Levi, thank you for sharing and being such a great mentor!! You’ll be missed but we’ll carry on!!”

Photos courtesy of Adrienne Marks

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