



June 2002

L.A. Powerhouse

Store by store, Marva Smith Battle-Bey is leading a neighborhood revival.

By William Fulton

On April 29, President George Bush came to the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Central Los Angeles to mark the 10th anniversary of the urban riots that destroyed so much of L.A.'s inner city.

While touting his effort to provide government funding for faith-based organizations, the President also embraced — quite literally — South Central's community leaders. During the ceremony, he leaned over and kissed urban planner and economic development expert Marva Smith Battle-Bey, a moment that was captured by an Associated Press photographer and featured on the front page of the next morning's *Los Angeles Times*.

Bush's visit was not the only important moment for Battle-Bey that day. Just as significant was the groundbreaking for a new retail center at the intersection of Vermont and Slauson avenues — the second retail project in that hard-hit neighborhood developed by her organization, the Vermont Slauson Economic Development Corporation.

Most community development corporations in LA and elsewhere focus on affordable housing projects, largely because of the subsidies and tax credits available. Almost a decade ago, author Nicholas Lemann called this phenomenon "the myth of community development" — suggesting that poor neighborhoods are not likely to improve if their leading community activists devote their energy solely to the creation of yet more housing for low-income residents.

Battle-Bey has sought to break that pattern. By and large, she has left housing development to other CDCs in South Central, many of which were created with the support of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation after the 1992 riots. Instead, Vermont Slauson has focused on commercial and industrial development and on technical assistance to businesses in South Central.

"Out of the force of her will and personality, Marva has done something that very few other people in South Central have been able to do," says former city councilman (and planner) Michael Woo, who is also a former LA director of the LISC. "She has had a tangible impact on a part of South Central that was severely hurt by the riots."

Latest success

The new shopping center will be the second constructed by the Vermont Slauson organization, and it's important for several reasons. It will recycle a long-vacant parcel of land in a critical section of South Central. It will also be the first neighborhood location for the Gigante supermarket chain, a major market chain from Mexico that is moving into Los Angeles in a big way because of the city's changing demographics.

Most important, it represents yet another development success for an organization and a planning-oriented community leader that have succeeded in bucking the prevailing trends in South Central for more than 20 years.

In a city where the nonprofit community development infrastructure has always been much weaker than places such as Chicago and Detroit, Battle-Bey stands out for the energetic way she has pursued neighborhood revitalization goals.

In addition to the two shopping centers, the Vermont Slauson organization operates a business incubator on Western Avenue (where Battle-Bey's office is located) and has helped a number of businesses to expand,

notably several furniture manufacturing companies. The group also owns two 20-unit housing complexes in South Central.

"We're back where we began," Battle-Bey says. "We started by saying we would do commercial, residential, and industrial projects. Not job training programs. Real estate development, nuts and bolts. We expanded to include any number of other programs, business development services and so forth. But now that there are so many community development corporations in Los Angeles [most of them doing housing], we can concentrate on our basic business again."

Midwestern roots

Battle-Bey grew up in Detroit and moved to Los Angeles in the 1970s to attend planning school at the University of Southern California. She came to USC, she recalls, for three reasons. First, it was in California — a draw for someone from the Rust Belt. Second, it had a flexible planning school that allowed her to craft her own program. And, third, it was located in the inner city.

The university is located next to the Los Angeles Coliseum, about a mile south of downtown Los Angeles and approximately two miles north of Slauson Avenue, which was hard-hit in the civil unrest 10 years ago. When Battle-Bey arrived, the school was widely viewed as disconnected from the inner-city neighborhoods surrounding it. But that never bothered her. She used the opportunities offered by the school and its location to make her own link between university and neighborhood — an approach that is indicative of her style. "I made the connection myself, and I still do," she says. "The networking helps a lot. I pick up the phone and talk to anybody at USC that I want to. I make the difference. I create what I want to exist."

In fact, it was in making this connection that Battle-Bey helped create the Vermont Slauson organization. After graduation, she went to work as an associate economist for Tom Bradley, an African American who was mayor of Los Angeles — then a mostly white city — for 20 years. In that job, she helped merchants in the Vermont Slauson area put together the group. Indeed, it was her original work with the merchants that led to the organization's business orientation.

"The old Sears store had closed down and the merchants were concerned," she recalls. "They went to Yvonne Braithwaite Burke [then a member of Congress and now an LA County Supervisor], and she told them to go see Tom Bradley's office. So, unlike many community development corporations, Vermont Slauson got started essentially as an offshoot of a chamber of commerce and merchants association. It gave us a more business-oriented membership." Two years after helping to start the organization, Battle-Bey joined it as executive director, and she's been there ever since.

Retail first

Although the business incubator and industrial assistance work is central to Vermont Slauson's mission, it is clear that retail development consumes most of Battle-Bey's attention. Like most inner-city neighborhoods, this one has been ravaged by a loss of general retail and by changing shopping trends over the last 30 years. In developing and managing two shopping centers, Battle-Bey has found herself in the middle of the ongoing struggle to attract high-quality retailers into the area — and in the middle of Los Angeles's demographic change as well.

General retailers such as department stores and furniture outlets have departed this historically African American neighborhood. New retail is coming in, but it's of a far different nature. "What we're seeing is fast food," Battle-Bey says. "This is what has come in to fill our large retail vacancies. When Hall's Furniture was burned down, it was replaced by El Pollo Loco. We had a very large Pep Boys. Now there's a Taco Bell and Pizza Hut. It's not equivalent by any means."

As an example of the struggle, she points to the fact that Vermont Slauson was unable to attract a "sit-down" restaurant to its new center. "We had a tentative deal with Denny's," she recalls. "When that fell through we went for Carl's Jr., but we couldn't get them. So we're putting in a Burger King."

The difficulty, she says, is that sit-down restaurants are expensive to create — and they are unlikely to locate

in the middle of an inner-city neighborhood if they can find another way to attract the patronage of the residents who live there. "We talked to Hometown Buffet, but they typically locate on the fringe of the neighborhood. Sit-down restaurants are big guzzlers of money. They have high tenant improvement costs. They look for big subsidies when they come into inner-city locations."

Battle-Bey's biggest accomplishment in the new shopping center is the Gigante supermarket. Immediately after the 1992 riots, revitalization experts focused heavily on the lack of high-quality supermarkets in South Central. The big chains all made commitments there, and Mayor Richard Riordan, a longtime benefactor of the area, even used his own money to open an independent market.

Recently, many of these supermarkets have either closed or been downgraded to discount outlets — an issue that has caused great concern to community activists. (According to a new study from Occidental College, South Center was heavily hit by supermarket mergers.) Unable to attract even an independent market to the new shopping center, Battle-Bey realized that the answer to her problem — and, indeed, the future of South Central's viability — lay in its growing Latino population.

Fueled by immigration from Mexico and high birth rates among recent immigrants, Los Angeles is quickly becoming a mostly Latino city. The eastern portion of South Central — along Central Avenue, the traditional center of African American culture — is now overwhelmingly Latino.

Located further west, the Vermont Slauson area is still about evenly divided, but Battle-Bey estimates it will be 70 percent Latino by 2005. So she approached Gigante, Mexico's third-largest supermarket chain, which already has two markets in Los Angeles and is planning 20 more. "I think my bringing in a Gigante is a big market move on my part," she says. "We think it's a good bet for them to come here; we think they'll do well."

Of course, Battle-Bey couldn't write off her traditional African American constituency, which still represents a major portion of the buying power in most of South Central. So she worked with Gigante to ensure that black shoppers would feel welcome. "We took African Americans to the other Gigante stores and talked to them to find out if they would shop there," she recalls. "We found out that they would — if the staff was bilingual and if the signs were bilingual."

So Gigante will make some concessions to the African American segment of the market, just as Battle-Bey recognizes that the future of the Vermont Slauson neighborhood is multi-cultural. In that way, she may turn out to be ahead of the curve yet again.

William Fulton is the publisher of California Planning & Development Report, which is based in Ventura.

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