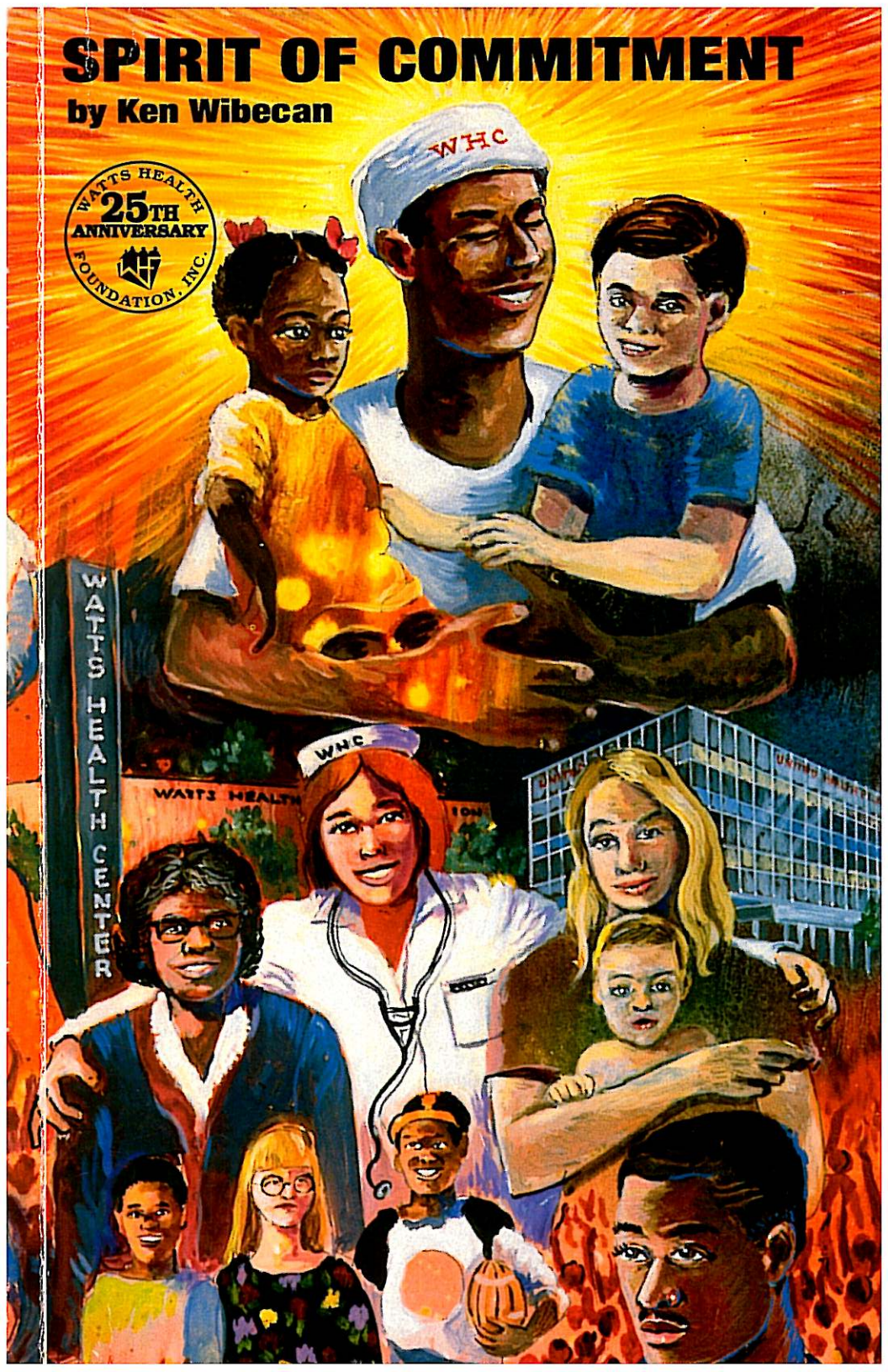


SPiRiT OF COMMITMENT

by Ken Wibecan



I N T R O D U C T I O N

“Racial equality continued to be an unreachable abstraction.”

In August 1965, conditions in the Watts section of Los Angeles were ripe for rebellion. Fueled by unemployment, poverty and substandard education, uprisings the previous year had scarred New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Rochester and a number of New Jersey cities; but, as yet, these conflagrations had not reached the shores of the Pacific.

In the nation as a whole, integration and civil rights were under discussion, but little had been done to actually improve the lives of millions of African-Americans. Racial equality continued to be an unreachable abstraction despite the high visibility of the 1963 March on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 Nobel Peace Prize, and a Civil Rights Bill passed in 1964. In that same year King still found it necessary to go to Selma, Alabama, to lead a voter registration drive.

Some 650,000 African-Americans lived in Los Angeles County in 1965, two-thirds of them in the Watts area. A full 66 percent of the young people who entered the three high schools in the area did not graduate, and approximately 24 percent of the population received some form of public assistance. While welfare administrators and employment officials argued over whether or not welfare recipients were employable, the streets were awash with the effects of what the McCone Commission,

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later appointed to investigate the causes of the rebellion, called "the dull, devastating spiral of failure that awaits the average disadvantaged child in the urban core."

"Watts was once known as Mudville because of its unpaved streets," recalls Ted Watkins, CEO of the Watts Community Labor Action Committee and a Los Angeles resident since 1933. "Most of the local industries did not hire Blacks. It was only after 1965 that Black became a positive thing. After '65 we concentrated on trying to bring things to this community that would be positive and would improve the economics of this community."

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The population density in Watts was 13,818 persons per square mile, compared with the average Los Angeles County density of 4,795. Male unemployment was among the highest in the nation, ranging from 18 to 30 percent, compared with less than 6 percent elsewhere. The infant mortality rate was 40 percent higher than for the rest of the city.

Dr. Gerald Horne, chair of the University of Santa Barbara Black Studies Department, wrote: "Black migrants to the 'city of homes' (Los Angeles) had to face the cold reality of restrictive covenants that put 95 percent of the housing supply off limits to people of color Blacks also encountered employment discrimination of a scale that surpassed anything in the Southern

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experience They were excluded almost entirely from key industries like rubber, auto and aircraft, while their plight in Hollywood moved an enraged Langston Hughes to compare the movie industry with Nazi Germany The Fire Department remained virtually all-white until the 1970s, while the Los Angeles Police Department was rigorously segregated.”

There were no banks in Watts at the time, no supermarkets, and numerous boarded-up stores – silent memorials to the exodus of white merchants that inexorably followed the influx of African-Americans to the area. The health status of residents was generally poor, and convenient medical facilities were nonexistent. Sick residents were forced to make a long and difficult journey to County General or Harbor General for treatment – and, once there, were subjected to long waits and impersonal care.

Ambulance service was almost unobtainable, and, according to the November 1967 issue of California’s *Health Magazine*, “It is not unusual for the mortician to precede the ambulance’s arrival by several hours.”

Because it had festered too long, like poet Langston Hughes’ symbolic *Raisin in the Sun*, on Wednesday, August 11, 1965, at seven o’clock in the evening, Watts erupted. When the smoke had cleared seven days

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later, 34 people were dead and more than a thousand individuals had been injured. Almost 4,000 had been arrested for crimes associated with the incident, and \$40 million in property had been damaged or destroyed.

Like the mythical phoenix that arises anew from its own ashes, the Watts Health Foundation grew from the aftermath of that 1965 rebellion. This is the story of the dedicated individuals who attended its birth and nurtured it through 25 years of continual growth and impressive community service. It is significant that earlier in 1992, the year the Watts Health Foundation celebrates its 25th birthday, Los Angeles exploded in another rebellion that vastly surpassed the original in death and destruction. Although Watts now has banks, supermarkets and enormously improved health facilities within its boundaries, unemployment has reached unprecedented levels, poverty is at its worst, and the average income of African-Americans is further from that of whites than it has ever been. In addition, hardly a dent has been made in the burgeoning drug business, and concerned residents have become overburdened with the difficulty of finding solutions to the problems of gangs, AIDS and teenage pregnancies.

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The community itself is no longer monolithic, and Black immigrants to the

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area have been replaced with Latinos from Mexico, Central and South America and Asians from a number of Eastern nations. These new arrivals are slowly becoming a majority in areas that were once almost all Black – attracted, no doubt, by the low rent to be found in the deteriorating housing stock. South Central Los Angeles is one of the few areas where poor people can afford to rent an apartment.

It is against this backdrop that the Watts Health Foundation celebrates 25 years of service to this community. Although the organization has grown and now serves more individuals of differing ethnic backgrounds than ever before, the ashes of despair still cover our community. In 25 years, thanks to hundreds of dedicated residents, staff and board members, the Watts Health Foundation has undergone unprecedented growth to become the largest health agency of its kind in the United States. But, during these difficult times, nobody knows better than they do that they have little time to sit back and rest on their accomplishments. There are many more mountains for them to climb. All indications are that they are well on their way.

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