

THE SUN INTERVIEW

# Both Sides Of The Street

Connie Rice Lays Down The Law To Cops And Gangs

BY DIANE LEFER | APRIL 2008



© Geoff Oliver Bugbee



© **Julia McHugh**

**I**n 1974, at the age of eighteen, Constance “Connie” Rice offered to do all the family ironing in front of the television just so she could stay home from school and watch the Senate hearings about the Watergate scandal, which was tearing apart the presidency of Richard Nixon. She became so engrossed that she burned her father’s shirt. That July, the House Judiciary Committee considered articles of impeachment, and Rice was again transfixed as Barbara Jordan, a lawyer and the only African American woman on the committee, talked eloquently about the Constitution before she cast her vote to impeach. Rice knew then that she would study law.

She graduated from Harvard College in 1978 and won a scholarship to attend New York University School of Law, where she filed petitions on behalf of death-row prisoners, including a notorious white supremacist. Rice, an African American who considers capital punishment an “obscenity,” was determined to save his life in spite of his racist beliefs. But her efforts were not enough. Before he was electrocuted, the Klansman sent Rice a thank-you note for her attempts to help.

Early in her career, Rice’s male colleagues didn’t know how to interact with this young feminist law clerk. Some tried to relegate her to fetching coffee and affixing index tabs. Rice, who already had a black belt in tae kwon do, didn’t hesitate to assert herself. After she discovered their practice of making important decisions in the men’s room, she and another female law clerk followed them in there and took part in the urinal-side meeting.

*In 1991 Rice moved to Los Angeles to work with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. She represented the grass-roots Bus Riders Union in a class-action suit against the Metropolitan Transit Authority. Her case was that the authority had discriminated against low-income, mostly minority bus riders by channeling funds into light-rail systems that benefited middle-class, mostly white commuters. Critics scoffed and said allocation of transit funds was not a civil-rights issue. Her own boss called to point out that the transit-authority board included two prominent NAACP members. (Rice reenacts the phone call: “Now, Connie, I’m sitting here with a Jack Daniels and three aspirin. Please tell me you did not file a lawsuit.”) She proceeded anyway. The 1996 consent decree put more than \$2 billion back into the bus system.*

*Despite this victory and others, Rice concluded that litigation was a limited tool for promoting social change. In 1998 she joined with law partners Stephen R. English and Molly Munger to found the LA branch of the Advancement Project ([www.advanceproj.org](http://www.advanceproj.org)) a nonprofit committed to making public-sector institutions — such as schools, transit, and law enforcement — equitable for low-income residents. She remains codirector today.*

*The Los Angeles Times has called Rice one of the “most experienced, civic-minded, and thoughtful people on the subject of Los Angeles,” and California Law Business named her among the ten most influential lawyers in the state. She is known as an irreverent commentator on PBS and National Public Radio and says she wants to “unparalyze the debate” on race rather than make everyone hold hands: “I want to change your behavior, not your soul.”*

*Although Rice has helped clients sue the Los Angeles Police Department [LAPD] for brutality many times over the years, her relationship with the LAPD has grown less adversarial within the past decade. When a scandal emerged in 1999 over misconduct in the LAPD’s Rampart division — including charges of cocaine theft, manipulation of evidence, physical abuse of suspects, and perjury — Rice headed a panel that studied the division and recommended reforms. She now works with the police to move LA law enforcement away from paramilitary-style operations and toward community policing.*

*She is currently writing a book titled Power Concedes Nothing. “Many of my friends are in office,” she says. “I’ve been suing my friends for twenty years. But even when you know the people in power, you still have to be a burr under their saddle and demand change, because power concedes nothing without a demand.”*

*In August 2007 Rice took the time to talk with me at her office near downtown LA. Her speech was animated, her outrage tempered by bursts of laughter at society’s absurdities. As the interview wound down, I couldn’t help asking about Rice’s famous relative, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Their fathers are first cousins, but the two women didn’t meet until they were adults. “Our politics are completely different,” Connie Rice said. “I’m trying to close the gap between the underclass and the working class, and she’s trying to close the gap between the millionaires and the billionaires.” That didn’t stop former California governor Pete Wilson’s secretary for judicial appointments from confusing them: She once called Connie on behalf of her Republican boss to ask for recommendations on judges. (“How bipartisan! I thought,” Rice said.) Connie was making suggestions for the Supreme Court when it became evident the secretary thought she was speaking to Condoleezza. The cousins met soon after and had a laugh about the mix-up.*

**Lefer:** As a civil-rights activist, when did you begin to question the value of litigation?

**Rice:** I always thought of litigation as the battering ram. You use it to break open the front door and make room for people to enter. Law is easy if you're in it only to win cases. But if I win a case against the police department and then send my clients back to a neighborhood where they dodge bullets and their kids aren't getting educated and their medical benefits have been cut off because they lost their second job, how much of a victory is it? Litigation can't do the delicate work of creating the political will to solve problems.

**Lefer:** Did you consider yourself in a rut when it came to police-brutality cases?

**Rice:** A second-year law student can do an abuse-of-force case against the LAPD. We won all of them, but we hadn't made a dent in the problem. I had fun suing them, and I loved dragging them in to depositions; it made me feel like an alpha female. They were so awful to our clients, and so racist and sexist and brutal, that I had a ball tormenting them in court.

**Lefer:** What changed your attitude?

**Rice:** A canine-unit case was brought before the court. It was outrageous what these handlers were doing with the police dogs. It was a brutality machine.

**Lefer:** I've heard there were videotapes of dog attacks in which police officers referred to black youths as "dog biscuits."

**Rice:** Yes, the officers would film the dogs in action and bring the tapes home.

The problem for us was that the victims of the dog bites were gangbangers or delinquents, and the officer would come into court with the dog and throw a ball up in the air, and the dog would catch it and then sit there looking cute. Once a jury saw that, it would be all over. So we transformed the case into a statistical one: We showed the bite rate — the percentage of times, when the dogs were deployed, that the suspect was bitten. The judge looked at the data and saw an 80 percent bite rate and a 47 percent hospitalization rate, and he said to the police, "You'd better settle." The cops were bristling. They said, "We want to fix this ourselves. Give us the money for retraining, and we'll change it."

I recognized their sincerity, so we told the city to give them the money. And do you know what? Within six months the bite rate was 5 percent. They got rid of the sadists and revamped the whole canine unit. They brought in the first woman dog handler and the first African American handler. Fifteen years later the bite rate



CONNIE RICE

is still below 10 percent. So when they want to change, and the change is on their terms and in their interest, cops can turn things around.

After that I asked myself, *How can I get rid of the mentality of brutality?* Of course one of the first lessons I learned was that they don't call it "brutality." They call it "good policing." My language shut down the debate. I wasn't communicating; I was still fighting them. My team and I had been having a good time beating them in court and feeling powerful, as if it were a sport. But the truth is we *need* cops. I've been around gang members for ten years and know what they're capable of. I'm not romanticizing these guys. I've seen videotapes of them gang-raping a little girl to force her brother to join. If I had a choice between a police state and a state run by gangbangers, I would take the police state.

“ I started looking at some of the conditions in the communities where the violence was. The levels of post-traumatic stress disorder among children in hot spots for gang activity are the same as in Mosul and Baghdad.

**Lefler:** How did you first get involved with street gangs?

**Rice:** I went to the Jordan Downs housing project in Watts right after the Rodney King police verdict had sparked riots in 1992. There was still smoke rising from burning buildings. I was going as a representative of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, where I'd been for maybe five months. I went straight from court that day, and I waltzed into the Grape Street gym looking like a black Republican, wearing more pearls than Barbara Bush. [Laughter.] And a group of women looked at me as if to say, *What are you doing here?* I said I wanted to help. They told me to go help their men, and they directed me to a trailer. Two rival gangs were inside brokering a truce, but I didn't know that, so I just went and stupidly knocked on the door: pearls, pumps, business suit, and all. I said to the man who answered, "I'm Connie Rice from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and I'm here to help you." Inside I could see black men with red bandannas and blue bandannas seated around a table — red on one side, blue on the other. The Crips and the Bloods. I probably looked like an extraterrestrial to them. They slammed the door in my face.

Three minutes later the door opened, and a guy in a blue bandanna said, "We know who you are. You can get us a copy of that agreement that the Jews and the Arabs have." I said, "The Camp David Peace Accords?" And he said, "Yeah, if the Jews and the Arabs can work their shit out, we can work ours out too." So I came back with the Camp David Peace Accords. That's how I got into it. I was like their research assistant. It's ridiculous that I get any credit for having brokered the truce.

A year later, when the second verdict — the federal verdict — was set to come down in the Rodney King police trials, I got a call from a gang member. The police were putting on their riot gear, he said. They had their rifles out and were blocking off the streets and removing their name tags. "You need to call the police chief and tell him there are going to be some dead cops," the gang leader said. I called Captain Bruce Haggerty, the head of the Southeast LA division. This was Good Friday, the start of Easter weekend. There were going to be barbecues in every park and backyard. The cops were mostly new recruits on their first assignment, because the veterans all wanted off for the holiday weekend. These recruits were ready for Armageddon, and, because of the

celebrations, they were going to see smoke and black men with no shirts everywhere. I told Bruce to have his officers put their name tags back on and bring along some gang-intervention workers and gang liaisons and go shake people's hands at the park and join them at the barbecues and the picnics.

**Lefer:** And he listened to you?

**Rice:** Yes, he turned it around. Can you imagine? And luckily the right verdict came down in federal court: two of the officers were convicted of having violated King's civil rights. But until then, both sides were ready to pull triggers. Not just the police. The gangs had been talking about shooting cops. That was the beginning of my role as mediator. I saw that both of these cultures had to change. So I started to explore the world of gangs. How did these guys get into this life? What made them think they had to kill somebody who looked at their Nikes wrong — besides typical male machismo?

**Lefer:** What about the documented rise in violence among girls?

**Rice:** That's true. The group with the fastest rate of increase in gang activity is teenage girls, and we have to pay attention to them. They've gone from being sex objects for the male gang members to committing felony assault. Some girls are creating a power base of their own. They're defending turf, and they've got guns. But girls are still a tiny percentage.

The despair these kids feel is so far from my experience. I was an air-force brat, and my family was all about hope and achievement. I asked one gangbanger, "Where do you see yourself in ten years?" and he said, "I don't." And the sexual behavior: I met a boy who'd just had his fifth child with his fifth girlfriend, and he couldn't support any of them. I try not to be judgmental, because it doesn't help, but I lost it and said, "What the hell is wrong with you? Put a sock on it! Haven't you ever heard of a condom?" He looked at me and said, "You got to understand: I'm not going to be around very long, and they're the only proof that I was ever here." The other kid who lifted the veil for me was about nineteen. He had killed two people and had gotten shot in retaliation and was in the hospital. I said, "Are you trying to die?" He thought for a moment about how to explain it, then said, "This is suicide by homicide. I kill anybody who reminds me of myself."

That's when I started looking at some of the conditions in the communities where the violence was. The levels of post-traumatic stress disorder among children in hot spots for gang activity are the same as in Mosul and Baghdad. I always begin with the question "Who has the power to change this?" Sometimes it's the voters. When it comes to police reform, it's the police. With gangs, it's the gang members and their communities. I need to ally myself with the people who can solve the problem. My strategy is to figure out what people need in order to create change themselves.

**Lefer:** It reminds me of the therapeutic adage that people won't change unless you first accept them as they are.

**Rice:** And then you help them realize that it's good for them to change. If you create incentives and let them do it on their own terms, they will. But litigation and court decrees will never change someone's mind-set.

After the Rampart misconduct scandal, we asked the LAPD to turn away from paramilitary, occupation-style policing and work with the community, and they looked at us as if we were out of our damn minds. We were



asking them to do something for which they had no resources or incentives. None of the criteria for getting promoted on the force were related to community policing. So I spent hundreds of hours interviewing cops, from uniformed officers to the chief of police, to figure out what resources they needed in order to feel safe enough to do community policing. Now we've got a task force, and we're rewriting the criteria for giving promotions, the training criteria, and the awards-and-incentives systems — because if no one gets promoted for making sure a kid *doesn't* get arrested, why should anyone do it?

Nevertheless the good cops who do community policing have been there all along, demonstrating that you can win the trust and cooperation of the community and get rid of the conditions that create crime. Because when you create trust, people in the community start calling you and reporting crimes, and that makes your job easier. The cops get backup from the community, which increases everyone's safety. When the police feel outnumbered, which they are, then they overreact and use excessive force.



© Harry Wilson

**Lefer:** The Rampart Division reportedly got reformed. It's supposed to be a model of police and community working together. But during the May 1 immigration rally at MacArthur Park, which is covered by Rampart, riot police stormed the park.

**Rice:** The Rampart turnaround is genuine. They really transformed that department. The cops who went into the park weren't Rampart cops. They were SWAT teams, which still operate under the old mind-set. They think, *We're the blue vanguard, and we get to do whatever we want to do.* But Police Chief William Bratton demoted two SWAT-team commanders, which is a big deal in that culture. And he has promoted change-agent cops over the dinosaur cops in the department. The idea is to rewrite the script so that recruits entering the academy will have no contact with the old culture. It's a start, but it's going to take ten years. It has taken me twenty-five years to get this far. And there were people working on it before I got here, so you're looking at a fifty-year battle to get the LAPD to come to terms with its legacy of excessive force.

**Lefer:** How do you change the split-second decisions that police make based on race?

**Rice:** Research shows that cops actually make decisions with *less* subliminal racial bias than ordinary citizens do. The overt racists are a tiny part of the force. The real problem is when the police aren't fluent in a culture. If you put me in the Samoan part of town, I won't know how to read those people. For many underclass African American males, life is a fight, so the way they say hello may be combative, and that scares white rookie cops who've never been in a black community. There are middle-class black cops who don't know how to read underclass African Americans either. They can't tell what's a real threat. The LAPD puts these rookies in South LA, where they shoot at anything that moves. It's all upside down. The least-experienced officers are in the most-dangerous positions, while the seasoned, mature officers on the force don't go out in the field. They go home at 5 P.M. in their company cars. What Chief Bratton doesn't understand is there are two LAPDs: a nighttime and a daytime. When you go out in the nighttime, it's scary.

LA is a self-policed city. There are about three hundred cops out there at any given time to police a five-hundred-square-mile city. That alone explains the hyperaggressive, paramilitary-style policing. When you have too few officers, they puff themselves up like porcupines to look more fierce than they are.

We've set up a system that actually guarantees high levels of violence in poor areas. They have a name for it: "containment suppression." My middle-class neighborhood is safe only because *those* neighborhoods soak up all the violence. The cops in Southeast LA will tell you they're not there to provide public safety; they're there to make sure the violence doesn't spread. We've got seven thousand unsolved murders in South LA. Our political system has engineered public-safety apartheid. Why is it acceptable that residents of West LA have a one-in-eighty thousand chance of being murdered, whereas people in Southeast LA have a one-in-two-thousand chance? Kids growing up in the southeast part of town have a one-in-fifty-one chance of being physically assaulted at a felony-battery level.

There's a one-in-10 million chance that any American is going to be hit by a terrorist attack, yet we spend billions every year to fight terrorism. We spend just seventeen cents a child to keep kids in Southeast LA safe. I'm not suggesting that Watts ought to become as safe as Bel-Air, where former first lady Nancy Reagan lives. I'm not that stupid. But we ought to be able to say that a kid can walk to school without a risk of being shot. I don't think that's too much to ask in the richest nation the world has ever seen.

**Lefer:** The crime rate in LA *has* gone down. The other day Chief Bratton said that with three thousand more police officers, he could reduce gang violence by 70 percent. Is that more suppression?



**Rice:** We've got an epidemic of violence, and containment suppression won't work forever, because epidemics jump boundaries. Gangs have already spread into the suburbs. We're seeing gang activity in other parts of the county and in neighboring counties, and Bratton knows it. He's not talking about the fact that there will be another six thousand kids ready to join gangs; he's talking only about his piece of it. Yes, with another three thousand cops he could reduce the drive-by shootings and the street crime in LA. But we can't arrest our way out of the bigger problem. Having more police does nothing to alter the mind-set of the kids who are attracted to gangs. Bratton himself has said, "Suppression's not enough."

**Lefer:** The Advancement Project's gang report calls for comprehensive prevention and intervention: saturating neighborhoods with mental-health services, creating jobs and opportunities. Is that too utopian?

**Rice:** It's not pie in the sky. I brought together police, gang-intervention workers, sociologists, educators, demographers, and epidemiologists who study violence as a disease — a real dream team of experts on gangs. And that team told the city and the county what they had to do to end a youth-gang homicide epidemic that their policies had helped create. The city and the county did not want to hear that twenty-five years of containment suppression had produced twice as many gang members and six times as many gangs, with no end in sight. Since the report, the crime bills have at least put in token prevention measures, and the mayor just hired a "gang reduction and youth development director." But it's nowhere near enough.

“ There's \$1 billion in programs for kids, but it's all wasted, because it's not being used to reduce the violence. When a kid comes home from a juvenile camp, there's no reentry team. . . . So the reentry team ends up being the gang.

**Lefer:** Gangs are entrenched in other major cities, and the violence is now spreading to smaller communities too. Have you found successful programs elsewhere in the U.S.?

**Rice:** The Harlem Children's Zone in New York City is a good example of a community-saturation strategy: comprehensive services for an entire neighborhood. New York also has Beacon Centers, which are school-based community centers offering a wide range of activities and services. In Boston, Operation Ceasefire achieved remarkable success, drastically reducing youth-homicide rates and keeping them down for years. That was a collaboration among the police department, faith-based institutions, and the public-health community. Comprehensive services were made available for youths who wanted out of gangs. But when the leadership changed, the resources were pulled, and youth violence went up again. We saw the same thing here with the Summer of Success in 2003: comprehensive services made a difference, but when the program ended, so did the positive results. It seems like as soon as we see something works, we close it down. Providing services has to be the long-term position.

**Lefer:** You've talked about gang-intervention workers. Are they former gang members?

**Rice:** About 80 percent of them are, but they've all been clean for at least ten years. They're the ones the police can call when there's a shooting that looks like it might trip off a gang war in a neighborhood. They broker cease-

fire agreements and try to calm people down. When somebody dangerous gets out of prison, they make sure the situation doesn't explode. And this works in other cities, too. One of the major elements in CeaseFire Chicago, which reduced neighborhood violence, was the deployment of ex-offenders and former gang members.

But for our study, the most-important team members were the epidemiologists, because they had no history with the situation. Civil-rights lawyers have not come up with solutions; the cops are part of the problem; the gang-intervention workers used to be part of the problem. We all keep doing the same thing over and over. The medical community didn't really have a horse in this race or a record to defend. To them a troubled community is a petri dish that fuels this virus called "violence." You've got to understand where the virus comes from to be able to inoculate against it and stop transmission. In some neighborhoods you can find certain families who are the carriers for the disease. Right now there's \$1 billion in programs for kids, but it's all wasted, because it's not being used to reduce the violence. When a kid comes home from a juvenile camp, there's no reentry team. All these government agencies don't cooperate. Parole doesn't talk to child services. So the reentry team ends up being the gang.

**Lefer:** When you delivered the gang report, did you think your plan would be put into practice?

**Rice:** No, because it means reinventing government, and the politicians don't have the guts to do it. The government addresses issues one check at a time, one service at a time. It's not aimed at solving problems. You simply service the problem. Our report says you have to transform government — and neighborhoods, and individuals.

When I said that county, state, and city agencies would need to work together, you'd have thought I'd grown a head out of my armpit. But it sounded nutty sixty years ago when people said the U.S. Army had to integrate. If you don't say what has to happen, it will never happen.

**Lefer:** You've said that some programs unintentionally validate the gang.

**Rice:** *Anything* that recognizes the gang as a legitimate entity validates it.

**Lefer:** But to broker any gang truce, you have to recognize the validity of the gangs, right?

**Rice:** No, you don't. That's where I messed up. When you sit down with the Bloods and the Crips *as* Bloods and Crips, you just reinforce the symbols and ethos and dynamics of the gang. You need to take them as individuals and talk about their leadership in the neighborhood, their roles as men in their community, and what they can do to reduce the violence. You get them to take on responsibility. Then you have them at the table as community leaders — not gang leaders. The gang doesn't get mentioned.

When the LAPD comes out and declares war on gangs, the gangs just get tighter. It makes their day: "We're at war with the LAPD!" They talk about who died in which battle as if it were the Civil War. The worst thing you can do is challenge the gangs head-on, call press conferences, declare war on them. When Bratton came out with his top-ten list of the worst LA gangs, it was a terrible mistake. The LAPD put the Grape Street Crips on the list but not their rivals, the Bounty Hunter Bloods. Do you know who was on my phone the next morning? The Bounty

Hunter Bloods asking, “How come Grape Street’s on there and we ain’t on there?” They were going to kill some people so they could get on the damn list.

**Lefer:** Does it validate the gangs when you offer programs for gang members and “at-risk” youth, while the kids who are trying to live peaceful lives get nothing?

**Rice:** Yes, that’s why you use a comprehensive public-health model, creating services for everyone. Most kids don’t go anywhere near a gang. But the 1 percent of kids who are in gangs create the epidemic of violence. It’s incredible how much violence a small number of youths with guns can cause. We are drowning in firearms. I’ve seen nine-year-olds with 9 mm Glock handguns. One gang member showed me a U-Haul full of machine guns in an alley within a stone’s throw of a housing project.

“ Political will requires a movement. . . . Right now we need a movement against violence, against hopelessness and despair, against the mind-set that says, *I’m going to be dead at nineteen, so why bother?*”

**Lefer:** Many community activists are agitating against Chief Bratton. As you grow closer to him, how does that affect your relationships with your allies in the community?

**Rice:** I’m walking a tightrope. I operate by gut instinct and let people know ahead of time what I’m going to do. Before I started working closely with the police, I went to Bo Taylor, a gang-intervention worker, and I said, “Bo, here’s my new strategy.” I told him and others beforehand so they wouldn’t be shocked by it. People in the community know I’ve sued the police for brutality. They know these are the same cops who threw me out of their headquarters bodily. One cop even said, “I can’t breathe the air she’s breathing.” And I tell gang members, “Remember how I spent time with you and listened to you and didn’t judge you? I’m going to do the same thing with the cops.”

It may blow up in my face, but I’m trying to clear a place where new ideas can be vetted and tested. We have to create some safe zones for innovative people in both camps.

**Lefer:** You’ve advocated hiring former gang members to work with youth, but gang-intervention expert Hector Marroquin was recently found to be continuing his gang activity while he had city contracts. How do you avoid public-relations disasters like that?

**Rice:** You don’t. There are corrupt cops, there are corrupt lawyers, and there are corrupt gang-intervention workers. If you see corruption in middle-class groups, what makes you think you aren’t going to see it in an underclass group? These guys are coming out of a gang or coming out of prison and trying to go straight. Some are going to fail. But they are the ones who are experts in the culture. We need them. They’re the ones who can figure out how to get rid of the code that says, “Don’t snitch.” They’re the ones who can reach these men and teach them not to beat up women and how to stabilize their lives when they return home from prison. Prison is a huge cause of the disease of community violence. To learn about the problems in prisons, we need to hear from ex-offenders. I don’t go into the prisons, but I want to help the people who do.

Is there a manual on how to do hard-core gang intervention? Not yet. That's why we've proposed an academy for both cops and former gang members who are interested in this work. But it's a high-risk venture for everyone. The cops who support it are out on a limb, and the rest of the department is trying to saw the limb off. The gang-intervention specialists could actually get killed for working with police officers. I'm taking the least risk. Who cares if I fall on my face?

My role is to be a catalyst, to make the space and make the introductions and help with translation. After four or five years we're at the point where a deputy chief picks up the phone and calls Bo Taylor to come down to the precinct. That wouldn't have been possible when I started this work thirteen years ago. I was at war with the cops in court; the gang-intervention workers were at war with the cops in the streets; the officers were out to annihilate Bo Taylor and others like him. There are some cops who are still out to annihilate them.

I just had some of the police gang patrol in a roundtable discussion. I hired retired, old-guard cops — ex-marines with crew cuts and barrel chests. I don't even want to know what they did when they were on the force. But you've got to have cops like them on your team to get others to the table. At that roundtable the cops told me they're not happy with the status quo either. They're putting their lives on the line, and it's not effective. I was betting they would come around and see that my gang-intervention specialists were part of the solution. Just last week we had a meeting of fifteen of the top gang-intervention workers and about seven of the top cops to talk about how we can work together.

**Lefer:** But you know, as soon as a neighborhood becomes safe, it gets gentrified, and the original residents get pushed out.

**Rice:** Affordable housing is a piece of the puzzle that's too big for me. I can deal only with the violence; that's big enough.

Most of our politicians here in LA are not stupid. They know what they need to do. But they just don't want to spend the political capital to change things. It all requires political will, and political will requires a movement, which we don't have.

**Lefer:** So you're looking for something comparable to the Bus Riders Union. You represented them in a class-action lawsuit against LA's Metropolitan Transit Authority in 1991, and they're still active as a grass-roots organization, promoting better public transportation for all LA citizens.

**Rice:** Yes, that's why, before you arrived, I was meeting with a veteran organizer. I need a base here, and I'm not a grass-roots expert. I know my limitations. We need to organize the poor. We need to organize the prisons. I can't make change happen, but the community can. In the Bus Riders case I was working with the best grass-roots advocates in the country. It got to the point where I could let the clients present the arguments in court. Ted Robertson, a kid who'd barely finished tenth grade and had never owned a closed-toe pair of shoes, did all the work and all the analysis. We bought him a suit and went to federal court — not just state court, but federal court, with the marble columns to make you think of imperial Rome. At first Ted was a little nervous, but five minutes in, the other lawyer and I were like potted plants, and Ted was leaning on the podium saying, "Now, Your Honor, if you'll follow me to page. . ."

My goal is to make it so the citizens don't need us. My goal is to help them build their own movement. Right now we need a movement against violence, against hopelessness and despair, against the mind-set that says, *I'm going to be dead at nineteen, so why bother?*

We need the mothers on our side. Just as Mothers Against Drunk Driving brought attention to the drunk-driving epidemic in this country, I think the mothers of murdered children could bring attention to the epidemic of violence. We've seen the mothers hold vigils with community leaders by their sides. Many of them speak out as bereaved individuals. But to create a movement, you have to have alliances. That means bringing together the mothers and the gang-intervention workers. First, though, I have to build the leadership capacity of the mothers. They have the moral authority, but they don't have an office or a telephone. They need salaries and a place to meet. And once the wealthy people on the Westside see the mothers stand up, I think they'll get on board too.

What if the mothers were to sue the gangs? *If* it were done — because it's not clear to me it's a good strategy — the judgment could be waived if the gang leaders got treatment and left the streets. Maybe it won't even take litigation. Maybe the gangs will be willing to sit down with the mothers and talk. Litigation is just one engine that can power a movement. My goal is to give my clients a voice, put them at the table, and empower them so I don't have to speak for them.

**Lefer:** The Bus Riders Union is a successful multiracial coalition, and the mothers could be one, too.

**Rice:** They've got to be. The Bus Riders Union is multiracial by design, and so are the gang-intervention groups. But multiracial coalitions require constant mediation to make sure old arguments don't flare up. You have to be aware of the tensions, and not just between black and white or black and Latino. There's history between Mexicans and Central Americans, and rivalries based on things that happened years ago between different communities in Mexico. It's like a family reunion; fights can get triggered at any time. You have to check your ego at the door and not let things bother you. You just listen and figure out how you're going to keep pushing toward the goal.

**Lefer:** The title of the book you're writing is *Power Concedes Nothing*. What's it about?

**Rice:** It's a call for us to become more organized and radical in our efforts to solve problems. The people need to stand up and make demands. We've been seduced by *American Idol* and hip-hop music and "bling" and the notion that this is the best we can do. Real power is not in our political systems. It's in the structures that control capital; it's in the international structures; it's in the hands of a very few, and it's becoming more concentrated every day. That's why low-income people can't climb the ladder of upward mobility. Our upward-mobility ladder starts in the middle class, which is struggling too. The rungs below that have been removed. The poor aren't even on the bottom. The poor are nowhere. The poor are in prison. They don't show up in the employment statistics and projections. My clients have been erased. I'm just too stupid to accept it. So I don't. I keep trying to put them back in the picture.

**DIANE LEFER** sometimes goes out in public dressed as a Guantánamo prisoner as a form of protest. Once, she found herself with her hands in the air and two guns pointed at her head after she was mistaken for a terrorist by the police. She is the author of the short-story collection *California Transit* (Sarabande Books) and collaborated with theater artist and therapist Hector Aristizábal on *Nightwind*, a play about his arrest and torture at the hands of the U.S.-supported military in Colombia. She lives in Los Angeles.

## ONE FREE SELECTION LEFT

ALREADY A SUBSCRIBER?  
SIGN IN ▶

Read two free selections from *The Sun* each month.

## SUBSCRIBE TO *THE SUN* AND SAVE 45%

Subscribers get full access to the current issue and more than 40 years of archives.

SUBSCRIBE

**BUY THE APRIL 2008 ISSUE FOR \$5.95** Order now to get instant access to this issue, and we'll also send you a print copy.

ORDER NOW ▶

# Correspondence

WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR ▶

Your interviews with Connie Rice [“Both Sides of the Street,” by Diane Lefer, April 2008] and Van Jones [“Bridging the Green Divide,” by David Kupfer, March 2008] both conjured in me the same reverie: Imagine this person sitting in Congress — or the White House!

Both also spoke eloquently to the conundrum expressed in the April 2008 Correspondence: Is it possible to overcome the politics of hatred with strategies inspired by love?

Rice and Jones are tough fighters for justice and equality, but they don't fight hatred with hatred. Rice learned to empathize with both violent criminals and the Los Angeles Police Department while condoning the actions of neither, and she helped prevent a war between cops and gangs. Jones appealed to white upper-middle-class environmentalists — a group he might

have dismissed as an elitist “other” – to get behind his Green Jobs program, and he got a bill passed by the U.S. House of Representatives.

Rice and Jones remind us that compassion, coupled with dedication and a sense of humor, can be the most pragmatic political tool of all.

*Sarah Rabkin  
Soquel, California*

**READ MORE LETTERS**

Copyright © 1974–2017 *The Sun*. All rights reserved.