

back row left to right:
Steve Chaney
Madeline Strong
JaAnne Gibson
Ganleen Wade
Ron King
Tony Parker
Olis Rogers

front row left to right:
Sonya Mims
LeRoy "Sunshine" Mills
Shawnee James
Robert "Case" Smith



The Los Angeles Poverty Department registers voters

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The USA is a nation in which one percent of the population controls ninety percent of the wealth.

Congress is intent on capping health-care and welfare benefits, thereby erasing them as entitlements. Its actions threaten direct and severe consequences for impoverished Americans.

Registering voters is a non-partisan activity. LAPD has been registering voters on Skid Row, assuming that democracy is served when more people vote and that when people vote they will vote in their own best interests.

Here are reports on our first foray into the neighborhood on December 2, 1994; they both challenge and confirm our assumptions.





Steve and Cain

Cain: **I didn't even do this. Register people to vote. I just went along with Otis and Anthony as an observer. I didn't want to have anything to do with it directly. When you register you're giving personal information to the government which they give to other people, like for jury duty. And as I watched you guys asking people to register, I didn't hear any of you speaking the truth about knowing what the whole voter registration thing is about. When you vote, when you push those buttons, how do you know where it actually goes? How do you know whether it counts or not?**

Steve: **How do you know when you get on a bus, if you're going to get where you want to get to?**

Cain: **Because I been on that bus before and it always went where the sign said they was going.**

Steve: **Didn't you ever get on a new bus line?**

Cain: **Look, they don't collect the votes from some neighborhoods, from South Central, from poor neighborhoods. They don't. You can't tell me that they do.**

Steve: **Bullshit. If you don't vote, if you don't stand up for yourself, you've got no right to complain about anything.**

Steve and Dave

Dave: **We went around the corner from here, behind the RTD terminal. That shanty town has grown like crazy in the last two months. We waited for the food line to come together. They feed about 4 o'clock. At 3:30 there were at least eighty people in line. We talked to fifty people and got two registrations. A lot of people said they were already registered, but I don't believe that. I think they just wanted to get rid of us. This one woman, I asked her, and she didn't say anything. She just shook her head like she couldn't believe what fools we were. Like, "What is the matter with you?" That's how she looked at us. Disgust. Total disgust. She waved us away, shook her head, she breathed out "phhu"— almost like she was spitting "Get away from me."**

Steve: **The two people that registered, one of them had been in the military. They**

both said, "You don't have a right to complain, if you don't vote." I said, "That's right." Because I believe that strongly myself. I always do vote, for just that reason.

Dave: **That woman made me feel like an ass. And really she was right. I mean, this country is going down. It's killing the planet, destroying everything. All the politicians, they all are about economic growth. Right? Right? Consumption. Consumption. Destruction. All of them. They're selling off all the resources, strip mining, clear cutting the trees, killing the animals. They're doing that right now. So what if some are a little better than others? So the planet lives another fifteen minutes, before everything chokes and dies.**



Anthony and Otis

Anthony: **This neighborhood is scary. Walking around here, it brought back bad memories of when I was living here on Skid Row in '89. We walked up Seventh Street from Central. Everyone we passed was dealing crack, or trying to buy it. Or selling themselves, transvestites. But, I played off the fear and didn't let it show. When we got to San Julian, there were a lot more people around. Not everyone was doing drugs, at least not all at the same time. I saw one guy had the needle in his arm. His buddies were watching him. Still, some people were just hanging, talking, sitting around a milk crate, playing cards. Asking people to register, I felt I was providing a public service, helping to empower people. Especially when someone registered, a couple people did. We probably asked two hundred people and we got three registrations.**

I had a political experience. A guy wanted to buy a cigarette from us for a dime, but when I offered one to the man, he didn't want it and took one from Otis instead. He waved me away and said, "I'm buying from the brother." It made me feel this big. But, I didn't go there. I didn't let it develop into a full-fledged hurt.

Otis: **I did it cause I was asked to do it. It represented people and their voice. The voice of Skid Row. So, I put myself on their level. I was getting them to vote. I didn't feel comfortable about that because they feel controlled by the government. For me, it creates a conflict. Personally, I think voting is a good cause**



but I never found anyone worth voting for. No one ever represents the interests of the poor people. For it to work for me, there would have to be someone who represents the interests of the poor people. Not just about number crunching. No one's going to do anything for the homeless. No matter who gets voted in, it's not going to make any difference for the people here. I guess I'm too radical. I don't see anyone trying to tear down the walls of Skid Row.

John & Greg

John: **Greg and I went to the Union Rescue Mission. It was Greg's idea. The URM has a big day room where about two hundred people sit around in molded green plastic patio chairs, like they sell at Thrifty's, with one TV up at the front of the room. I hadn't been there since they'd moved into the new building on San Pedro Street. I remembered the old URM—when it was next to St Vibiana's. There they had school cafeteria-type chairs, orange and mustard colored fiberglass with thin metal legs. Three hundred people would sleep in those chairs all night long when they ran out of beds. In the day room, some people were sleeping, some were talking, a few were playing cards, most were watching a kung fu movie on the TV. "I'm not interested." "No." "Can't vote, I'm on parole." "I'm already registered." "Not interested." "Let me keep the form. I don't want it sent here. I'll wait till I have another address."**

Two hundred people here, and we probably'll get two registrations. I'm glad we're here and I'm feeling like a jerk. Two guys about forty have got their chairs turned around facing one another having a conversation. Enjoying themselves. Good looking, alert, one of them in a white t-shirt looks like he's been pumping iron. "Excuse me, are you interested in registering to vote?" "No thanks man."

The man in the white T looks at his buddy and chuckles. "I never vote, never voted in my life. No point in it." "Me neither," says the friend.

I take a step backward, begin to pull away apologetically. I'm feeling frustrated in my role as voter registrar. I can't unpack a whole political argument about the damage being done by the Republican "revolution" in Congress. A congress that would have never been elected if more people had voted. You're not

allowed to be partisan in doing voter registration. I don't think you're allowed to talk politics.

I paused mid-step, thought and said, "I never voted for years. The first time I voted was to vote against Nixon or was it Reagan? It must have been Reagan—I didn't vote for Nixon or Humphrey because what's the choice." My skepticism connected. Then, without elaborating, I said, "Hardly anybody voted in the last congressional election." The man in the t-shirt smiled. His bottom front teeth were missing, all four of them that should be between the canines. He leaned toward his buddy, and said, "Clinton's alright. He gave all this FEMA money out to people." He was talking to us both. "My sister got \$2,500 and she hadn't even had any damage at her place." "What's that?" his friend said, "you mean after the riots?" "After the earthquake," we answered, at the same time. "The people they sent out there, field agents, they looked around and saw that she didn't have anything. They wanted to help her out. They wanted to give people money. They'd ask her now what about your TV? She says, 'It's old. It don't work too good.' They'd say, 'Yeah, I can see that, must have been messed up by the quake.' It wasn't, but they'd say, 'So, let's see that's \$300 for the TV. And what about a VCR ? I don't see one. You must a had to throw it out. So, that's about \$200. OK, now, did you lose any furniture?" "Is that right?" said the friend. "I'm tellin' you. They just went on like that till they'd totaled up \$2,500." "Twenty-five hundred dollars," repeated the friend, savoring it as he said it. "Mmmm-mmmm," I said. We looked at one another and shared a laugh. "All righty," I said. "Nice talkin' to ya." "Yeah, you too." "You too."

Greg: The best way is to find someone who isn't doing anything, not someone walking down the street or carrying a lot of things. That's why we went to the Union Rescue Mission. On the way to the Mission, I know a lot of people down here. "What you doing?" "I'm registering people to vote." I'd ask them if they wanted to register to vote. It cracked them up. "You getting paid? Who you working for? It is a job, isn't it?" I said no. "Really!" We left the Mission and walked over to Winston Street and tried to get into St. Vincent's. John tried to talk to some of the shoppers on Winston but they were in a hurry. We couldn't get into St. Vincents. It was closed. We went back over to Fifth Street, heading east. On





Fifth Street the sidewalk is lined with people from San Pedro, for two blocks, all the way to Towne. Most people against the wall are busy buying, selling or smoking drugs. It's sad, man. Get up and do something for yourself, man. Damn! I'm glad I'm out of here. This neighborhood, brothers still bringing themselves down. Doing that shit. Hittin' the pipe. Break that damn thing. Get up. Get out of here. It's sad. It makes me angry, but it's sad. My best moment was walking down Fifth Street. A fella is sitting against the wall in a red t-shirt, baggy blue jeans and a blue baseball cap. "What's up?" "Want to register to vote?" "No man" "Why not? You're not doing nothing?" He wasn't doing drugs. He wasn't high. He was just sitting there. So, I say, "You're not doing anything, why not register?" So he says, "OK, you got a cigarette?" "No." Maybe next time I see him I'll give him something. "Here, fill this out." I had him just fill out the address where he was right then. "Just put down the corner of Fifth and Towne. You can do that. It counts." So, he did. He put it down just that way.

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