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## Watts Changes, And a Mainstay Bids It Farewell

By RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD

LOS ANGELES, Nov. 27 — The pint-size White Sox beat the A's 6-0, ending the baseball season the other day at Ted Watkins Park in Watts. James Dawson hauled out the trophies and T-shirts and some final words of direction and discipline.

"Win or lose, be sportsmen," Mr. Dawson told the losing players, 11- and 12-year-olds fidgeting with bitterness under his towering gaze. "Nobody is better than anybody. If he strikes you out, he struck you out."

A folding table appeared at home plate, and before handing out the awards — everyone got one — he thanked the players and the coaches and, about himself, offered this: "I have been running this league for five years and I hope to do it for another five years."

This is the same league that one of Mr. Dawson's sons coached in, and it was after a basketball game three years ago that the young man was shot and killed, yet another victim, it seemed, of the neighborhood's persistent violence. So Mr. Dawson's words this month were offered as assurance as much to the club as to himself, for change has come both to Watts and to the Dawsons, now formerly of East 105th Street.

In the neighborhood best known, depending on one's frame of reference, for the 1965 riots or the Watts Towers public art project, black families are moving out and Latinos are moving in, a migration taking place in many other once predominantly black neighborhoods in Los Angeles.

Sooner or later many middle- and working-class black families debate whether they should continue to be the stable oaks of the community or the seeds of distant, safer ones in the far-flung Los Angeles suburbs.

South L.A. or Moreno Valley? Watts or Lancaster?

One night not long ago, Mr. Dawson's wife, Dorothy, turned to him in bed and popped the question he knew would eventually come: "What do you think about moving to Lancaster?"

It was not a question, really. He knew her mind was made up. Their son Jihad, having given up on Watts, was already there, more than 50 miles north in the high-desert constellation of subdivisions. And who could begrudge



Photographs by J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

With the baseball season over, it was time for James Dawson, a coach, to hand out trophies to the players earlier this month at a park in Watts.

his wife, Mr. Dawson remembers thinking, after all they had been through?

Over 26 years they had raised their two boys in their split-level house and filled their lives with backyard barbecues, slumber parties and ballgames in the park.

But an afternoon three years ago shattered their lives and set in motion their own stay-or-go tug of war, with Lancaster finally triumphing.

On a recent drive to their old house on 105th Street, Mr. Dawson, 55, slowed a block or so away and nodded to an otherwise undistinguished spot on the street of bungalows.

"This is where Salim was killed," he said of his elder son, indicating a patch of sidewalk without stopping. "I heard the shots."

Salim Dawson had every opportunity himself to leave Watts, but came back.

After graduating from Verbum Dei High School, a highly regarded Roman Catholic school in Watts, Salim went to Arizona State University but, Mr. Dawson said, felt dislocated there. Within a couple years he came back, continued his studies at a local college toward a degree in psychology, counseled young children and began coaching in the sports league he had once played in.

Mr. Dawson recalled friendly arguments with Salim over African-Americans' responsibility to community and over the decline in civility among children, in addition to endless debates about how the afternoon's game was played.

"We would talk about why parents don't drop their kids off at the park, why parents are not as responsible as they should be," Mr. Dawson said.

On Feb. 22, 2003, Mr. Dawson and Salim coached games on the basketball court at Ted Watkins Park.

Mr. Dawson went home and thought Salim was not far behind. Jihad was in the house. And so when Mr. Dawson heard gunfire, he recalls, he was disturbed but not overly worried.

"Glad my boys are not around there," he recalls thinking.

It did not take long for the knock on the door. Mr. Dawson ran to Salim, bleeding on the sidewalk. He searched frantically, and in vain, for a pulse.

Salim was 23. The police theorized that he had been killed in a case of mistaken identity. As far as he knows, Mr. Dawson said, the shooter was never caught. He and his wife say they do not dwell on that.

"Justice is not going to bring Salim back," Mrs. Dawson said. "He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Jihad, now 23, itched to leave soon after. Almost anywhere else in America, "Where you from?" is a polite query, but here it carries lethal consequences among turf-minded gang members. Lots of young men were not answering correctly.

A couple of weeks after Salim was killed, the substitute coach for his team and a companion were also shot to death for no apparent reason. Mr. Dawson stepped in as coach of Salim's team — their triumph in the final game of that season made the local news — and he and his wife decided then to stay, against the odds.

Maybe there is a part of him that wants to carry on Salim's legacy, but there is also the club, whose membership, he said, has dwindled from several hundred children in the 1990s to about 100 now. Mr. Dawson has no ready explanation for the changes.

Parents seem to feel more pressure to work longer hours and more jobs these days. And some of the newer, Latino parents favor soccer — not one of the club's sports — and do not speak

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enough English to converse with Mr. Dawson and the other coaches, who are mostly black. According to Census data, the population of Watts in 1970 was 90 percent black and 8 percent Latino; in 2000, it was 38 percent black and 61 percent Latino.

But Mr. Dawson, who like other club leaders opens his wallet to defray costs for parents who cannot afford the \$25 registration fee, said he sensed parents these days seemed less inclined to participate in their children's activities.

"They have to work, and I can understand, but I work also," he said. "I make a point to make time for this program."

One coach said he thought the numbers had begun to drop around the time Salim and the others were killed, during a particularly violent spasm of gang fighting, though the Los Angeles police report that violent crime has declined in the past couple of years in the Watts area.

"There were a lot of killings around then, and people didn't feel safe at the park," said the coach, Parnell Roberts Sr., a former convict who credits Mr. Dawson with helping turn his life around.

Mr. Dawson coached when Salim and Jihad played in the league and stayed after they moved on. Coaching brings a certain satisfaction, like when a player turns from goat to hero, and he sees the league as a strand, however modest, helping hold Watts together.

"I see the need to provide leadership and direction to the kids here," he said. "They have a lot of problems at home, broken homes, single parents. A lot of times the male figure is absent. Not to say I am a role model, but I think it is needed at times."

Mr. Dawson works as an accountant at a nonprofit health agency in Arcadia, near Pasadena. The commute to work from Lancaster is more than an hour,

and to Watts from home can approach 90 minutes in bad traffic, but he has committed to coaching two or three nights a week and at games on the weekends.

Other parents initially fretted. "He brings a lot to the community; everybody looks up to him, not just the kids," said Denise Dumas, whose nephew plays in the league.

Others in the community tended to lean on the Dawsons as longtime,

### A father and coach gave his life to Watts, and lost a son there. Now he has left.

successful residents. Mrs. Dawson operates a tax accounting business from her home. She advises clients not only on their 1040s but also on their 10-year-olds.

"A lot of people became dependent on us and we became the arbitrators, the referees, the counselors," she said, sitting in the serenity of her living room in Lancaster, where the family moved on Nov. 11. "They would call year round, not just tax season, and talk about everything under the sun."

Salim's killing gradually changed her outlook on Watts. In their first years there, she felt part of an effort to revitalize the community.

Even as the ethnic makeup changed — children often interpreted for her Spanish-speaking clientele — and the clatter of police helicopters overhead remained a constant, she said she still felt comfortable.

But she has come to believe it will never truly rise high, not with three

large public-housing projects within blocks of one another and all the social ills that spill out from them.

"We can only help so many people," Mrs. Dawson said. "We can't save the world."

She predicts Mr. Dawson will give up coaching within a couple of years but may still show up to yell advice from the bleachers.

"Dawson" — like everyone else, what she calls him — "feels the need to continue to contribute, but I feel I have done my part," she said.

When word spread that the Dawsons were moving to Lancaster, to a subdivision called Coyote Hills that is so new the telephone wiring is just reaching the new homes, a group of neighbors and park regulars knocked on their door. This time, a pleasant surprise, as the group handed them a card addressed to "the Parents of the Park."

The Dawsons are now settling into their new house in Lancaster, where the black population has more than doubled to 16 percent of the 118,718 residents since the late 1980s. In Watts, their former neighbors are working through their loss.

One of them, Miss Ruby, which is what everybody calls Ruby Mae Randall, 90, has lived on the Dawsons' old block for more than 60 years, and used to look after their home as they did hers. She has seen the neighborhood go from "Spanish and then black and now the Spanish are coming back again."

"It's always changing, but I am staying," she said.

Still, a good neighbor is hard to lose.

"I am so sorry to see you go," she told Mr. Dawson, closing the iron gate on her front door as he stepped out.

Mr. Dawson didn't miss a beat "I am gone in body," he replied, "but not spirit."



As the former President of the KIS Club at Ted Watkins Park and one of the most admired leaders in the KIS army of community based volunteers, James Dawson loved bringing the joys and discipline of playing baseball to the boys and girls he coached. His teams won several KIS championships.

(photo: Freedom Photography)



James Dawson's (top row, right) legacy will include leading his teams to several championships. Here he's pictured with his winning team in the KIS Baseball Championship Finals, 2005. (photo: Freedom Photography)

(photo: Freedom Photography)



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