

OBITUARIES

Michael Zinzun, 57; Ex-Black Panther Challenged Southland Police Agencies

By Jocelyn Y. Stewart, Times Staff Writer
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Long after other revolutionaries of his day had retired or found less-confrontational ways of fighting the system, former Black Panther member Michael Zinzun was still on the front line, doing battle with police.

In frequent clashes — some on the streets, others in the courtroom — Zinzun challenged the practices of law enforcement agencies in Southern California.

Those battles won him the respect of some, the scorn of others, and led to changes in the Los Angeles Police Department. In 1986, Zinzun lost the sight in one eye in a confrontation with Pasadena police. He later won a \$1.2-million settlement.

"I'd rather lose an eye fighting against injustice than live as a quiet slave," he told a Times reporter in 1986. "I just can't see myself standing back."

Zinzun, who protested police brutality, worked with at-risk youth and was the host of a cable television program, died Sunday in his sleep at his home in Pasadena, said his wife, Florence. He was 57. The cause of death has not been determined.

"Michael became an icon [because of] an uncompromising commitment to doing this work, the courage to follow his convictions, and being unafraid to challenge power and authority — at times at dramatic personal costs," said Anthony Thigpenn, a longtime friend and president of Strategic Concepts In Organizing and Policy Education, a social justice organization in South Los Angeles that teaches residents to understand and participate in public policy formulation and decision-making. "There's a real question who will carry on that work now that Michael's gone."

Zinzun came of age in the highly politicized days of the late 1960s.

The beginning of his radicalization came when he was an auto mechanic, operating his own small repair shop behind a gas station in Altadena. A large oil company purchased the station and evicted Zinzun, putting an end to his entrepreneurial endeavor.

In 1970, he joined the Black Panther Party, found it politically stifling, and left less than two years later. He later referred to his time in the party as "an educational experience," one that clearly influenced his life's path.

By the mid-1970s, there was "almost an epidemic of either shootings or beatings" of African Americans by police, said Thigpenn, who was director of campaign field operations for Antonio Villaraigosa during the 2005 L.A. mayoral race.

Zinzun was working on issues in Pasadena, Kwaku Duren in Long Beach and Thigpenn on a case in Pacoima. The three men came together in the Coalition Against Police Abuse, Thigpenn said.

When an allegation of abuse arose, coalition members would meet with the victim's family and the community and search for ways to achieve justice, Thigpenn said. The coalition also documented incidents of abuse and sometimes accompanied community members to the police stations to file complaints.

A key element of the organization's platform was the call for the creation of a civilian police review board in cities throughout Los Angeles County, a call that reached its height after the controversial 1979 police shooting of an African American woman, Eula Love, outside her home in South Los Angeles. The coalition collected thousands of signatures but failed to obtain enough support to place the issue on the ballot.

By the late 1970s, Zinzun's organization had attracted the attention of the Los Angeles Police Department's Public Disorder Intelligence Division, which infiltrated the group with undercover agents. The coalition joined with other organizations and sued the police. In the fallout surrounding the lawsuit, the LAPD disbanded the division. The coalition received part of a monetary settlement.

Sometimes, instead of observing and documenting police actions, Zinzun was in the middle of the fray.

In 1982 he was present when Pasadena police officers attempted to arrest a man for public drunkenness and another for allegedly striking a police officer. Police later arrested Zinzun, accusing him of making threats against five officers at the scene, an allegation he denied.

"I been around police long enough to know what you can and can't say to the police," he told a Times reporter in 1982. The case was later dropped.

The 1986 incident, in which Zinzun lost his sight, began when he heard the shouts of a man being arrested by police. A crowd gathered and in the commotion that followed, police said Zinzun punched an officer.

He injured his eye, they said, when he fell while being chased by police. Zinzun denied striking an officer. He said that he was pushed down on the pavement and that officers had beaten him with a flashlight.

After Zinzun lost an election for a seat on what is now the Pasadena City Council, he successfully sued the city of Los Angeles and an assistant police chief for defamation. A lawyer for Zinzun argued that during the campaign the city and the assistant chief disseminated information in a way that wrongly suggested that Zinzun was the subject of a file in the Police Department's anti-terrorist division. A jury awarded Zinzun \$3.8 million, but in 1991 a judge overturned the award.

Interest in Zinzun's efforts to combat police abuse increased after the beating of Rodney King and the 1992 riots. Mainstream leaders were much more accessible to members of the coalition. "Before you couldn't even get them on the phone," he told *The Times* in 1992.

Zinzun was born Feb. 14, 1949, in Chicago and spent part of his childhood in the Cabrini-Green housing projects. His father died when he was 8, and his mother sent him to Pasadena to live with an aunt.

In addition to his wife, Florence, whom he married in 1982 after his divorce from his first wife, Zinzun is survived by his mother, four sisters, two brothers and six children and stepchildren.

Though he continued to work on police issues in recent months, Zinzun had turned his attention to the kitchen. He was enrolled in a Pasadena culinary school, studying to be a chef. "He just wanted to learn everything," his wife said.