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DIGITAL NEWS FEED

Power, Loyalty and the Law: What L.A. City Council Member Curren Price's Trial Means for South Los Angeles

by Stephen Oduntan
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On a recent Sunday morning in South Los Angeles, before the service began and before the choir warmed up, Shep Crawford noticed a familiar figure slip quietly through the side doors of the sanctuary.

No entourage. No security detail. No announcement. Just a dark suit, a slow nod to a few ushers, and the easy, unhurried gait of someone who had been there a hundred times before.

“He’s Uncle Curren,” Crawford said later, laughing softly. “Everybody knows him.”

In the Ninth District, Curren Price is less a politician than a presence — the relative who shows up to the cookout, the graduation, the park cleanup. Crawford has watched him sit through gang-intervention breakfasts for hours without speaking, hugging grandmothers, remembering names and lingering long after the cameras are gone.

“It’s not normal when he isn’t there,” the pastor said. “That’s when people start asking questions.”

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For more than a decade, Price cultivated that familiarity in South Los Angeles, a district long shaped by disinvestment and political neglect. First elected to the City Council in 2013 after years in Sacramento, he built a reputation as a hands-on operator — championing higher wages for hotel workers, backing street vendors, steering affordable housing and courting development that reshaped Exposition Park and nearby corridors.

To supporters, he is the rare elected official who answers his phone.

To critics, he is something else entirely.

That contrast has grown sharper in recent months.

Instead of moving between churches and community centers, Price now spends much of his time downtown at the defense table in a Los Angeles courtroom, where prosecutors accuse him of conflicts of interest tied to his wife's consulting firm, Del Richardson & Associates.

At a recent preliminary hearing, the wooden benches filled early. Latecomers leaned against the walls. When the judge entered, a low murmur rippled through the gallery — part curiosity, part loyalty, part disbelief that a man so embedded in the neighborhood could be there at all.

Price has pleaded not guilty. The case has not yet gone to trial, and arraignment is scheduled for March 13 at the Foltz Criminal Justice Center.

Still, the proceedings have cast a shadow beyond the courthouse steps, forcing residents to reconcile two versions of the same man: the councilmember they see at barbecues and park cleanups, and the defendant described in legal filings.

Step outside the courthouse, though, and the language softens again.

On Central Avenue, that version begins with Rose Rios.

She is 80 years old. On most mornings, her trunk smells faintly of pepper and grease.

Before sunrise, she stops at Costco and buys rotisserie chickens — sometimes 30 at a time — then drives block to block handing them out to people sleeping on the sidewalk. Blankets ride in the back seat beside socks, T-shirts and bottled water.

She has been doing this for half a century.

“Every month,” she said matter-of-factly. “Sometimes more.”

Rios does not work for the city. Her ministry operates without staff, grants or contracts. She simply drives.

For years, she has made the same loop through South Los Angeles — under freeway overpasses, along alleys behind shuttered storefronts and past tents pitched beside vacant lots. She feeds whoever is there. No forms. No questions.

“I try to make them comfortable,” she said. “They really having a hard life.”

When she was younger, she spent two months sleeping voluntarily on Skid Row just to understand what the streets felt like at night. She called families to reunite people who hadn’t spoken to relatives in years.

“It could be me,” she said. “God want us to help each other.”

From that vantage point — fifty years of watching the same blocks change and not change — her standards for politicians are simple:

Do they show up?

Do they answer the phone?

Do they actually help?

When she first met Price, he had just returned from Sacramento to run locally.

“He’s a caring man,” she said. “Real nice. Easy to reach.”

Sometimes a crisis flares up on a weekend — trash piling high, an encampment dispute, someone needing immediate shelter. She calls someone in Price’s office.

“He’s always available.”

“If it wasn’t for him,” she added quietly, “I don’t know what probably would happen.”

Her faith is personal, not political.

“I trust him with my life.”

That sentiment — less ideological than intimate — echoes across the district. It shows up not only on the streets, but inside City Hall.

Inside City Hall, that trust takes another shape.

For Jose Ugarte, who began as a field deputy reporting potholes and illegal dumping before rising through the ranks of Price’s office, the councilmember’s style is defined less by speeches than by small, practical gestures.

“No job is too small,” Ugarte said.

If a tree needs trimming or trash needs hauling, Price shows up. Ugarte remembers days when the councilmember would pull on gloves and help load debris into a truck himself, then head straight to meetings with developers or department heads.

“He’ll put his hands in the dirt with you,” Ugarte said. “Then go talk to the president of a company about bringing jobs to the district.”

To staffers, the legal case feels distant from the daily rhythm of calls and cleanups.

“He hasn’t even had his day in court yet,” he said. “People should see the facts before they judge.”

But inside the courthouse, the tone could not be more different.

Gone are the nicknames and easy familiarity. In their place: counts, statutes, disclosure forms and calendar dates.

Inside the courtroom, the pace felt clinical.

Deputy District Attorney Casey Higgins sat at counsel table, one leg crossed over the other, flipping through binders and peppering witnesses with questions about contracts, invoices and dates. Across from him, defense attorney Michael Schafler remained seated, objecting quietly — hearsay, relevance, foundation — only to be met, more often than not, with a soft “overruled” from the bench.

Legal pads rustled. Spectators leaned forward, trying to follow the steady march of exhibits and testimony.

Over the course of the week, the hearing unfolded less like a dramatic confrontation than a slow layering of records.

Prosecutors projected spreadsheets and invoices onto courtroom monitors, walking the court through years of contracts tied to clients of Del Richardson & Associates, the consulting firm run by Price’s wife, Delbra Pettice Richardson. They matched those payments to council votes and city business.

Former staffers described how disclosures were tracked. Calendar entries were read aloud. Emails were entered into evidence. Testimony drifted into billing

codes, reimbursement forms and internal memos — the language of bureaucracy rather than spectacle.

Still, each entry added another layer.

Prosecutors allege Price participated in official decisions involving agencies that later paid his wife’s company — relationships they say should have required disclosure or recusal.

Schafler pushed back repeatedly, calling the case speculative and arguing the issues amounted, at most, to administrative or paperwork failures — not crimes.

To legal observers, it was routine procedure.

To many in the gallery, it felt heavier.

During breaks, supporters drifted into the hallway, whispering and comparing notes.

“What’s the crime?” one woman asked.

“It just feels like they’re coming after him,” another said.

Others pointed to the judge’s repeated rulings against the defense, saying the proceedings felt one-sided.

They weren’t debating legal theory. They were trying to reconcile the man they knew with the defendant described in charging documents.

Beyond the hallway, the conversation widened.

Some civic watchdogs and government reform advocates say the case highlights broader concerns about how City Hall handles conflicts of interest. Even the appearance of financial overlap between public decisions and private consulting work, they argue, can erode trust.

Prosecutors, however, frame the matter less as an ethics lapse and more as a question of criminal responsibility.

Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan Hochman rejected the defense’s characterization of the case as mere paperwork mistakes, noting Price had been warned about potential conflicts years earlier — including after a 2019 Los Angeles Times investigation scrutinized his voting record.

The investigation has also cast scrutiny beyond Price himself, extending to those around him.

Richardson, Price's wife and the head of Del Richardson & Associates, was identified early in the district attorney's inquiry but has not been charged with any crime. She attended each day of the hearing, seated behind the defense table among Price's supporters.

Legal observers note that preliminary hearings simply determine whether enough evidence exists for a case to proceed — not guilt or innocence.

Areva Martin, a Los Angeles civil rights attorney and CNN legal analyst, told LA Focus that the decision should not be mistaken for a judgment on the merits.

"The court's recent ruling refusing to dismiss the criminal charges against Councilmember Price is not a verdict. He is entitled to the full presumption of innocence. At the heart of this case are alleged violations of city ethics rules—matters that are ordinarily addressed through administrative processes, not criminal prosecution—and conduct for which there is no evidence of criminal intent or mens rea."

But for many residents, the questions stretch beyond court dates. Expectations look less like legal arguments and more like presence.

They look like showing up.

Which is why, on that Sunday morning, the scene at Crawford's church felt so familiar.

Price came alone and stayed for hours.

"He said, 'I'm just here for support.'"

By midafternoon, the benches thin. Life moves on.

Outside, the questions remain basic:

Who shows up?

Who answers the phone?

Who stays when the cameras leave?

For now, South Los Angeles keeps watching — as the man many still call “Uncle Curren” moves between two worlds: one built on familiarity, the other on judgment.

And here, leadership is measured not in court filings, but in who keeps showing up.
