

April come she will

"THE perception of injustice is one of the most powerful stimulants of anger, violence and aggression in humans," says Seymour Feshbach, a student of human aggressive behaviour and professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He adds that this human trait is one of the most pronounced differences between human and animal aggression.

Feshbach has a natural laboratory on his doorstep: south-central Los Angeles. Last April (a year ago), this was the scene of abandoned affray, some of it broadcast live on television, following the beating of a black motorist called Rodney King by several police officers.

A year later, south-central is still a riot waiting to happen. The outcome of two trials, one the federal trial of Rodney King's tormentors on somewhat abstract charges of restricting King's 'civil liberties' and the court appearance of blacks charged with dragging a white truck driver from his cab and beating him almost to death, could provide the spark.

Feshbach was well placed to co-ordinate UCLA's response to April's spasms. Following a statement by the Chancellor of UCLA's commitment to healing the wounds, Feshbach was appointed as the Chancellor's special assistant to co-ordinate long-term links between campus and city.

In essence, Feshbach's task is to keep track of, and if possible to integrate, the many independent and disparate university social programmes, to raise money for them and to link them with UCLA's academic mission. Lessons learned can add depth to academic programmes, in that students of social sciences can receive what Feshbach calls "meaningful field experience" that is not available elsewhere.

To be fair, UCLA's professional schools such as social welfare, architecture and public health have had a continuing involvement with the city which, after all, provides its research material. At the other end of the spectrum, the UCLA student body has a voluntary and active Community Service Commission (CSC) which coordinates outreach programmes, and was doing so before the riots. The CSC is beyond Feshbach's remit, although he now has funds to help it if needed.

If the variety of post-riot initiatives has a common theme, it is the facility of university people to devote to the city's problems time and analytical skills that the residents lack. More than 600 faculty members have volunteered to provide specialist services (such as urban planning, architectural drawing, counselling, business and legal advice) through the

university's Office of Community and Governmental Relations.

At the same time, community leaders visit UCLA for periods of between six and 12 weeks as part of the Community Scholars Program, to learn how to go about such things as writing letters to secure funding for a community organization.

Yet for all this activity, many of the residents in south-central are unaware even of the existence of UCLA. Unlike the University of Southern California, which is right in the thick of it, UCLA might as well be on another planet. So there are moves to set up a social services centre in south-central, a cross between a mission and a field station.

Those who know about UCLA, on the other hand, are inclined to be suspicious of its motives. After the Watts riots 30 years ago, people felt that they were being exploited as a laboratory for the benefit of scholars. Yet there is also a

feeling that the university, with its resources and skills, will be able to solve all LA's problems. So, beneath the cynicism and criticism, there are "unrealistic fantasies" of what the university can do: UCLA must be careful not to make promises that it cannot keep.

Relations between the university and the police are only just beginning. Faculty are starting to appear at the police colleges, talking about such matters as ethnic diversity. Just over half the students at UCLA come from LA, and there is no single ethnic majority. About a third are whites, a third Asian, and most of the rest are Hispanics. Blacks constitute only 14-15 per cent, and are a declining presence both on campus and in the city.

Where are they going? Feshbach says, "they are either leaving the city and going to other parts of southern California, some are returning to the South, and others are getting killed." Shooting constitutes the single biggest cause of death in young black men, and it is having an effect on the demography, even if to keep blacks away from LA. □

LOS ANGELES MUSEUM

A circle of fire

SOME of the T-shirts on sale at the George C. Page Museum, just off Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, will be advertised as pre-washed. One of this winter's downpours, exceptional after six years of drought, found its way into a basement stockroom, soaking the

found all the holes in museum research, poorly funded at the best of times, and has given it a thorough soaking. In Los Angeles, social problems add to the funding crisis. During last April's civil unrest, says Black, Exposition Park was "ringed in fire. No-one came in here, and there was no damage, but it leaves a perception in the public mind. 'Is that a place I really want to go?'"

The Los Angeles County Museum began in happier times, in 1913. One of its tasks then was to oversee the excavation of the Rancho La Brea Tar Pits, remarkable asphalt seeps that have yielded thousands of bones of Pleistocene animals. For around 40,000 years, bison, sabre-tooth cats, wolves and mastodons roamed what is now Rodeo Drive, and some of them

became ensnared in the tar pits.

It is easy to see why. Just one tar-pit remains (complete with statues of mired mammoths), with a thin sheen of surface water that looks, deceptively, deeper and more drinkable than it is. The sprawl of downtown LA engulfed the site sometime in the 1930s, and in 1977, the George C. Page Museum was erected on the site to display the finds. But Black,



Mammoths in the tar pits.

merchandise for the museum shop. Craig Black, director of the Los Angeles County Museum, drove to Beverly Hills through the rain from the main museum in Exposition Park — a green square amid the seedy south-central district — to inspect the damage, which he was thankful to find minimal. But rainfall is the least of his worries.

Like the rainwater, the recession has