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### L.A. Poverty Department Stages 'Utopia'

November 30, 2007

By Nicole Kristal

Kevin Michael spent 17 years in and out of recovery for various substance-abuse problems. The former lawyer overcame a heroin habit at age 23 only to later fall into a crack-cocaine addiction that resulted in his disbarment and left him on the streets of Los Angeles' Skid Row.

Now five years sober, Michael will perform in the Los Angeles Poverty Department's show *UTOPIA/dystopia*, which turns downtown residents of all kinds -- including the homeless and formerly homeless -- into actors.

"I'm disbarred but no longer disgraced," said Michael, noting that the services provided by nonprofits such as LAPD, a performance group based in Skid Row, helped him finally get back on his feet and beat his addictions. "LAPD acting group has been a part of my recovery."

In *UTOPIA/dystopia*, an LAPD production that will be staged Dec. 6 - 9 at the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater (REDCAT), Michael tells his personal tale of recovery and portrays real-life Los Angeles police commander Andrew Smith. "Acting has exposed me to a different mode of communicating," said Michael, who noted that he has no formal acting training. "It's helped me see my community through a new pair of glasses, because there are so many talented people out here." He said his work with LAPD helps him educate and raise awareness about addiction and social issues and reach other people who are suffering to let them know there is hope.

#### Rising Above

*UTOPIA/dystopia* is the brainchild of LAPD's founder and artistic director, John Malpede, a writer-director-actor-activist who created the organization in 1985. The group is currently staging street performances titled *Glimpses of Utopia* that depict through movement what people from Skid Row and other parts of downtown and the city envision utopia to be.

The *UTOPIA/dystopia* performance is scripted; it's based on real-life experiences of the poverty-stricken and transcripts from government officials, with a little bit of fiction tying them together. "The premise is, if you're living in utopia, it should be one that everyone can participate in," Malpede said. "It definitely questions the representation of the new downtown as one where we need to drive poor people out of the neighborhood. You can't have your utopia on the backs of doing damage to other people."

Charles "Chas" Jackson is another Skid Row resident performing in *UTOPIA*. He joined LAPD a decade ago after seeing a flier soliciting performers. Jackson plays a comedic female character in the show named Mrs. Shat, the fictional president and CEO of the Central City East Association, a real-life association that advocates on behalf of property owners on the east side of downtown Los Angeles.

To play the role, Jackson will have to shave his mustache and wear high heels and a wig. "It's fun to me," he said. Jackson has learned a lot about acting from the experience, he said, adding that Malpede has taught him discipline, how to get into and create a character, and how to follow stage direction. He said the show presents a new image of Skid Row. "We're



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showing that even if we're down and out, we still have hope, and we're showing that we do have productive lives. We can rise above what's down here," Jackson said.

**A Chance to Heal**

Malpede said past LAPD projects have covered issues such as homeless families, homeless veterans, and recovery from alcohol and drug addiction. All works foster the idea that there's more to Skid Row than these stereotypes. "Some of this piece and other pieces document the fact that it really is a community where there are a lot of positive steps going on, which doesn't necessarily get the play [in the media] that the negative stuff gets. The area's represented as only addicts living in boxes, but that disregards the thousands of people who are in recovery who are living in hotels who are doing different kinds of cool things in the community -- whether that's starting a basketball league or organizing a grass-roots effort to clean up trash in the neighborhood."

Michael's personal story, for one, proves that the Skid Row environment can cultivate recovery. He currently makes ends meet through part-time work at a law firm and receives a stipend for performing in LAPD shows -- quite a success, considering that it took him almost two decades to get clean. Now when he sees people struggling on the street or falling back into old patterns, he figures it just isn't their moment yet to heal. From personal experience, he said, he knows that getting off the streets will always be a possibility for Skid Row residents: "This is a community of hope."

UTOPIA/dystopia runs Dec. 6-9 at REDCAT, 631 W. Second St., L.A. Tickets are \$10-\$20. (213) 237-2800. [www.redcat.org](http://www.redcat.org).

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