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Celebrating Visibility: The Los Angeles Poverty Department Walks The Talk

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Yellow-shirted volunteers make the rounds, greeting friends and stopping to watch a pickup basketball game. A woman wearing a fluffy leopard print trucker cap, embossed with the words **BLACK REBEL**, invites the audience to her church's twenty-four hour prayer event. Last weekend kicked off the **Walk the Talk** Parade, a biennial celebration organized and led by performance collective the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), who have devoted three-decades to giving voice to Skid Row residents.

Here on the streets of Skid Row, Los Angeles Poverty Department founder and director John Malpede oversees the distribution of toiletry kits, food, bottled water, and other supplies. The parade has the feeling of a royal procession, with its combination of Malpede's courtly stewardship, the glistening satin-and-gold-lamé portrait banners -- by Highland Park artist Brian Dick -- hoisted high on repurposed mop handles, and the joyous rendition of "When The Saints Come Marchin' In" by the New Orleans-style eight-piece Mudbug Brass Band.

The banners immortalize each of eight LAPD-christened "Skid Row Visionaries" honored at the parade, whom Malpede describes as "profound individuals who founded small initiatives and led big organizations on Skid Row" including: **Gladys Park Improvement Project founder General Jeff**, Zelenne Cardenas and Charles Porter of **United Coalition East Prevention Project**, former **Midnight Mission** director Clancy Imislund, Los Angeles Fire Station No. 9 Captain Walter Duffy, **Skid Row Photography Club** founder Michael Blaze, retired director of the **St. Vincent de Paul Cardinal Manning Center** Joan Sotiros, and Dr. Mongo, former poet laureate of the Los Angeles Community Action Network.

No one knows for sure what was going on with the allegedly naked man who has climbed up on a billboard a few blocks from Gladys Park, but his presence has diverted several emergency response vehicles from their scheduled function as escorts for the **Walk the Talk** Parade. Ninety minutes into the four-hour parade, the billboard situation is resolved, and the parade and its escorts leave Gladys Park for the corner of San Pedro and 6th Street. At each stop, the LAPD performers, including artist-activists from inside and outside Skid Row, stage interviews with each honoree, juxtaposing biographical detail with biting humor, social commentary

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Mike Kelley's "Mobile Homestead" | Courtesy of MOCA



Mike Kelley's "Mobile Homestead" | Mike Kelley Foundation

Behind the scenes, Dick, co-founder of the **Nationwide Museum Mascot Project**, embodies the day's ad hoc collaborative spirit. "I found out about the positive things the Poverty Department was doing, and I like to align myself with positive art, and so here we are," he says, explaining how he came to make the banners. When one banner's pole fails, a neighborhood resident agrees to donate a shower curtain rod from his grocery cart as its replacement. Later, Dick requisitions a piece of scrap wood from Fire Station No. 9 to fix another fallen banner. The improvisational repairs work, and the visionaries' golden faces are pushed higher into the overcast sky. Mike Kelley's "Mobile Homestead" is the parade's caboose; the meticulous reconstruction of the late artist's childhood home squeezes down the narrow streets, and will reside outside his exhibition at MOCA. At every stop, Skid Row residents come outside to watch and cheer.

Representations of poverty are often erased from our cultural landscape and Malpede says that by ignoring poverty, it continues to proliferate. "Policy follows perception," Malpede says. "By not really looking further [into poverty], we get to the point of not looking at all."



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The Los Angeles Poverty Department was born in 1984, when Malpede, then living in New York City's East Village, noticed a man sleeping in a Cadillac convertible with its roof down. "Snow was falling on him," he remembers. "The whole area was pretty funky at the time, but I was still shocked to see him and other people on the street. There weren't always thousands of people living on the streets; up until the Eighties, that wasn't happening. Social policy, and the connection between rents and the way social services were implemented, changed." A subsequent trip to Los Angeles, then in the grips of preparations for the 1984 Olympics, made an equally strong impression. "There was a lot of concern about, 'Oh my god! We've gotta make the city look really good, what about all these people on the streets?' I went to a feverish meeting at the City Council with the Board of Supervisors and met a bunch of homeless people and local activists from the Catholic Worker." For the next year, Malpede divided his time between New York and L.A., where he had become involved in advocating for Skid Row. "I was offered a job at [L.A.'s] Inner City Law Center as an outreach paralegal. On nights and weekends we pushed all of the desks out of the way and started doing performance workshops. Thirty years later, it's still happening." This year, the LAPD was the subject of a retrospective exhibition at New York City's Queens Museum, "**Do You Want the Cosmetic Version or the Real Deal?: Los Angeles Poverty Department, 1985 - 2014.**"



Walk The Talk | Courtesy of LAPD

Mike Kelley's "Mobile Homestead" was an organic addition to Walk the Talk. "I knew Mike for a long time," Malpede says. "His idea was to use it as a resource for different kinds of community activities. 'Walk the Talk' is its first public appearance in L.A. We installed a 20 foot timeline about the making of Skid Row with a lot of dates and artifacts in the trailer along with all the portraits of the people from the first and current Walk the Talk parades [the first occurred in 2012] and some other resource materials. When the 'Mobile Homestead' is installed at MOCA, someone from the LAPD will be with the 'Mobile Homestead' from May 29th to June 16th as a live resource."

When Walk The Talk reaches Fire Station No. 9 to honor Captain Duffy, the man himself emerges to watch his scene. LAPD performers emphasize that residents receive the same quality of care from Station No. 9 as they would in Beverly Hills. Afterwards, Duffy pulls one of his trucks out into the street to display the "Firehouse 9 Skid Row" medallion that adorns its massive white ladder. "We're looking into getting the name of the neighborhood painted on the side of the truck," he promises. By the time the parade reaches its final stop at the New Genesis hotel -- the "Mobile Homestead" having successfully snaked its way down narrow Winston Street-- the jubilant attitude of the parade proves contagious, attracting new spectators. When the last scene ends, the LAPD members dissolve back into the crowd, and whatever boundary existed between them and the residents of Skid Row once again disappears.



Walk The Talk | Courtesy of LAPD



Walk The Talk | Courtesy of LAPD

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