

Walk the Talk parade celebrates skid row and its leaders



The Walk the Talk parade participants proceeded from Gladys Park northwest to 5th and Main streets, led by the Mudbug Brass Band and stopping for sketches celebrating local activists. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

By **GALE HOLLAND**

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General Dogon, a neighborhood activist, pulled up on a tricked-out bicycle with a red fur seat and a Pee-wee Herman doll riding the handlebars.

The Mudbug Brass Band blew "Sweet Georgia Brown."

A mobile gallery with a skid row history display — which will become part of the late artist Mike Kelley's MOCA retrospective — brought up the rear of Saturday's Walk the Talk parade, a rollicking event to celebrate the downtown neighborhood's leaders and declare itself a community.

"It's a demonstration of skid row culture," said Manuel "OG" Compito, the driving force behind a 3-on-3 streetball league at Gladys Park. "And it does have a culture."

Organized by the Los Angeles Poverty Department, an area theater company, the parade aimed to counter the stereotype of skid row as a dumping ground.

More than 3,400 people live in shelters or on the sidewalks of the 52-square-block area — the densest concentration of homeless in the country. But an additional 7,000 are permanent residents of welfare hotels and apartments.

Many suffer from mental illness or substance abuse. Others are in recovery. They've been here for years, in many cases decades.

They credit their own grass-roots cleanup campaigns and cultural activities with beginning to turn the neighborhood around. And to the extent that the gentrification of downtown Los Angeles has brought improvements, Compita said, the citizens on skid row plan to reap the benefits.



"We're not going anywhere," Compito said.

The parade participants proceeded from Gladys Park northwest to 5th and Main streets, trailed by a group of Stanford University students on an urban art walking tour and some Christian students from Sunnyvale who were handing out hygiene kits.

They stopped along the route for Poverty Department sketches honoring activists like General Jeff Page, a member of the downtown neighborhood council. The actors, all drawn from skid row, depicted Page's fight to bring Gladys Park back to life by demanding clean water fountains, chess tables, shady areas and a basketball court.

"I'm a proud skid row resident," said Page, a former hip-hop entrepreneur, as he acknowledged the tribute to loud applause.

Pastor Cue Jn'marie, a skid row preacher, said the parade also was designed to awaken hope in those it passed by, splayed out on the sidewalks, lost in depression or addiction.

"You never know who's struggling," he said. "And this is the trigger they need to improve their lives."

Stephanie Bell, 51, who was homeless on skid row in the 1990s, came back Saturday to see friends and appear in the skits. She said she remembered seeing the rats that leaped knee-high off the sidewalk, but thinks better times are coming.

"I have seen a vision of all the people here dressed in suits and dresses, high heels, just like in

uptown, going to their jobs," Bell said. "It can happen."

Crushow Herring said he recovered from drugs on skid row, played basketball overseas and now is a designer with a loft and boutique on Melrose Avenue.

"I love skid row," he said. "Everything you need to get back on your feet, skid row will give it to you."

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