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Troupe blends advocacy for homeless with art

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In a city teeming with out-of-work actors, John Malpede bypasses casting agencies and recruits for his performance art troupe where other directors would do a double take - Skid Row.

As head of the Los Angeles Poverty Department - the other LAPD - Malpede uses performing art as a tool to prick the public's social conscience about homelessness and other symptoms of chronic poverty.

"This country doesn't have any social policies to prevent people from becoming homeless," he said. "We use people affected by these failed policies to scrutinize those policies. And a lot are really good actors."

LAPD's crusade is not amiss in a city renowned as the home of some of the country's most famous faces and lavish lifestyles, but also as the location of the nation's densest concentration of homeless. Some 5,000 people live on Skid Row - a 50-square-block downtown neighborhood that long ago surrendered to crime and vagrancy - 1,800 of them on the street, the rest in shelters.

The city's pervasive homelessness is increasingly inspiring groups like LAPD, which see the arts as a way to highlight public awareness of a social problem that many have grown inured to and as a pick-me-up tool for those living hand-to-mouth.

"Homeless people often don't think they can do anything. These programs change one's own perception of what's possible," said Laura Zucker, executive director of the Los Angeles County Commission on the Arts. "We know they help improve people's self-esteem."

Kevin Michael Key is living proof of that effect.

After spending 40 years addicted to heroin and crack cocaine, he found LAPD on Skid Row and has since toured the country and performed in Paris with Malpede. Earlier this year, he landed a small speaking role in the movie "The Soloist," which recounts Los Angeles Times columnist Steve

Lopez's friendship with a homeless musician. The movie was partially filmed on Skid Row using locals as nonunion extras.

"It has helped bring to me a new perspective and perception," the 58 year-old Key said. "I used my experience as a basis for expertise. John has encouraged and nurtured that."

Almost 20 arts nonprofits in and around Los Angeles now incorporate homeless people in projects ranging from plays to painting to cinema, but LAPD was a forerunner of the homeless arts initiatives and is the only group that aims to mix art and advocacy.

Some of the works performed by Malpede's 20-member troupe, most of whom are homeless or formerly homeless, seem esoteric, but they attract attention - and that's the point.

In the play "La Llorona" ("The Weeping Woman"), Mexican immigrant women recounted and sung in Spanish their own experiences as battered wives, exploited nannies, and mothers who lost their sons to violence or prison.

In a piece of performance art titled "Glimpse of Utopia," a line of 200 homeless people and art students spent an afternoon swaying in abstract motion like trees along an avenue downtown to symbolize their yearning for more shady green boulevards in the city.

The growing homeless arts movement has spurred the Los Angeles County Commission on the Arts to design a grant program that it says is the only one of its kind in the country. The commission recently granted \$18,000 each to five groups to fund creative projects for homeless people. The National Endowment for the Arts provided half the cash, Los Angeles County the other half.

Some of the grantees have been working with homeless people for years. LAPD, which Malpede founded in 1985, won a grant to offer acting workshops for mentally ill homeless on Skid Row that culminate with a final performance.

Other programs tap different segments of the homeless population. The Imagination Foundation will have professional actors work with homeless veterans. California Institute for the Arts students will offer creative writing classes to runaways in Hollywood, while Pasadena's Armory Center for the Arts will teach homeless families skills such as ceramics and making video stories.

At the end of the yearlong program, an evaluator hired by the commission will track participants to see if the projects help boost them to their ultimate goal: a home.

Key said the support he found in LAPD was invaluable in stabilizing his life. He had found a place in a single-room-only hotel on Skid Row before he discovered the performance troupe, but he said acting has helped him stay there and given him the sense of purpose and self-worth that he needed to eschew crack pipes and needles for six years.


Malpede, 63, harbors no illusions that LAPD's work will change the world. Instead, he sees the troupe's role as building a sense of community in a largely ignored neighborhood and showing that homeless people have intrinsic value as human beings. "People have incredibly stereotypical ideas about homeless people," he noted.

That emphasis on giving marginalized people an outlet to validate their lives drew Susan Gray, cultural planner of the City of Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency, to collaborate with LAPD in creating an exhibit called "Skid Row History Museum." Displayed at a Chinatown gallery last summer, it featured a sidewalk "sleeping zone," a flimsy tent, a cardboard model of a flophouse and photographs and videos of Skid Row life.

If it makes the viewer uncomfortable, that's fine by Malpede. Awareness, he said, is the first step to action.

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