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'Walk the Talk' archival website honors Skid Row

By Sarah Donahue

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Skid Row boasts unsung heroes and a local website is honoring them.

File photo

The legacy of Skid Row's unsung heroes is being honored with a people's history website that was created in efforts to challenge the stigma that surrounds the widely misunderstood community.

The Los Angeles Poverty Department, a Skid Row community-based art organization, launched the Walk the Talk website at the beginning of the month to pay tribute to 68

honorees who have devoted themselves to leading active civil engagements and visionary initiatives to better Skid Row.

Every other year since 2012, the Los Angeles Poverty Department holds a Walk the Talk Parade during Memorial Day weekend to celebrate Skid Row's dedicated residents. A New Orleans-style brass band marches through the streets as people carry portraits of the honorees designed by renowned artist, Mr. Brainwash. Due to COVID-19, the parade didn't happen this year, which prompted the organization to take the celebration online.

"We started working on this project in the context of COVID because their parade was canceled," said artist and technologist Robert Ochshorn, who volunteered his craft to create the Walk the Talk website. "We thought it would be a good opportunity to translate the parade online and also release some of the archival work that we've been organizing."

The website archives interviews and performances of 68 people residing or working in Skid Row who have created a significant, positive change in the neighborhood. Without these civic efforts and initiatives, the community could have been bulldozed a long time ago, according to the Los Angeles Poverty Department.

The initiatives and works highlighted in the honorees' legacy include fighting to create access for things that many take for granted, like parks, garbage cans, handwashing stations, portable toilets, as well as access to litigation and free community music programs.

"If people look at the website, they're going to see the breadth of the experience and the breadth of the people," said John Malpede, Los Angeles Poverty Department's founder.

Malpede was a performance artist in New York before moving to LA where he connected with the people of Skid Row and dedicated himself to building opportunities for the community.

Ochshorn, who resides in Northern California, created the website using his company's platform, Reduct Video, which offers users an elegant layout to learn the authentic history of the people who have devoted themselves to bettering a struggling community. Each honoree has its own parade performance and interview, where users can simultaneously view and read the typed transcript to learn about the community.

"It's all about the people for me," Ochshorn said. "I've been to many of these festivals for all Skid Row artists that are held annually, and I'm just so blown away by the talent, dedication, commitment, humanity from everyone I meet in that orbit and it's always humbling and inspiring to witness."

The site uses cutting-edge technology, where users can search for keywords and can see honorees who have discussed the topic. Users can also easily click anywhere on the transcribed words to be immediately taken to that section of the video, making it easy to search through and view the recordings.

"One of the things I'm most excited about right now is actually this launch as a beginning and seeing what kinds of conversations that we can organize on top of it using it," Ochshorn said. He mentioned that he hopes this website will be a useful resource in mass communication about Skid Row and the issues that surround it, like police brutality, as well as access to housing, mental health, and drug rehabilitation services.

For the next year, the Los Angeles Poverty Department will invite scholars, community activists and artists to comment on the significance of the archives in a 5-minute video that will be added to the website.

It's important to control the narrative of Skid Row because what most people see in media coverage doesn't show the truth that's told in the honoree's videos, said Charles Porter in his Walk the Talk response video. Porter is a coordinator for a community-based drug prevention program called United East Coalition Prevention Project and has worked in Skid Row for 20 years.

"It's really a powerful tool and it highlights the connection between art and history and activism," Porter said about the website.

The Walk the Talk website is powerful tribute to the movements connected to the people and shows the advocacy, vision, genius and passion of the community that wants to thrive and improve, he said.

"It becomes something that's timeless; there are people that are no longer physically here with us that are here with us," Porter said. "We can extend back in time and listen to how

people responded to issues we're still facing right now, and we can learn lessons about what worked and what didn't work."

Since 1985, The Los Angeles Poverty Department has used art to bring the people of Skid Row together. Their efforts include opening a Skid Row History Museum as well as organizing performances, annual art shows and festivals to unite the unhoused individuals with the social workers who dedicate themselves to the community. Their goal is to put forth the notion that Skid Row can be bettered by encouraging and nurturing the power and talent that lies within.

"It's a special history," Malpede said, "This low-income residential community has a lot of heart and soul."