

# LAPD *inspects* Raleigh

Linda Frye Burnham

*The Blue Van Gang  
and their prey.  
Otis Rogers  
is in checked shirt.  
photo: Erin Beach*

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nobody can look at the homeless any more. Not even you. As you walk quickly from Raleigh's City Gallery to the City Market, you avert your eyes from the people lining the sidewalks of Moore Square asking you for help. You thrust a dollar at the first one, then firmly cloak the rest in invisibility. You force yourself not to think about the savagery of a democracy that lets its people sleep in the cold, eat from trash cans, lose themselves in drugs, and face death on the streets. You close the door on the place in your soul where you've put Bosnia and AIDS and child abuse and the rest of the horrors you have no answers for. You don't look because you'll see your own face, your

own helplessness, your own homelessness.

So she's invisible, that thin woman in the crazy wig with the hollow look in her eyes. A ghost of her self stands there facing your protective shield. You don't see her and she knows it.

Hunger, cold, and fear are bad, but they come and go—there are meals, there is shelter of a sort, there are sometimes whole days of safety. But what eats away at her personhood, what decimates her ability to recover her dignity and participate in American life, is invisibility, the certainty that she is walking in an unreal, ghostly nightmare, literally unheard and unseen by you, by everyone.

This spiritual poverty engendered by homelessness is the deepest theme of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), in Raleigh for six weeks this winter to create theater with some of its citizens of the city who are temporarily without shelter. These folks, "the homeless," came together to make a new art work out of the issues of their own lives and strike a blow against invisibility.

John Malpede left L.A. about five hours after the January earthquake and landed in Raleigh during a terrifying cold snap that killed more than 100 people on the eastern seaboard. From one natural disaster area to another. But Malpede knows how to land on his feet. He's been living intimately with the disaster of homelessness for ten years.

Malpede is a performance artist who is the founding director of LAPD, an award-winning, touring performance company of homeless and formerly homeless people. He came to North Carolina with four other LAPD members for "LAPD Inspects Raleigh," a six-week residency that culminated in a performance at City Gallery February 24-26.

LAPD, now ten years old, is as well known on the theater circuit as it is on the streets of many of America's big cities. What began in 1985 as a performance workshop for the homeless at the Inner City Law Center on L.A.'s Skid Row has become an international artistic success and often an agent for real change in homeless people's lives.

The company, working at home and on the road, has a repertory of original collaborative works that examine the issues,

*Emma Haxton,  
Alta Clark and Otis Rogers  
as the Williams family.  
photo: Erin Beach*



causes, and realities of homelessness. They include *No Stone for Studs Schwartz*, a raucous musical based on a rambling yarn by Jim Beam, a loner who, even though he won a writer's award for the piece, still lives outdoors; *Jupiter 35*, based on a member's fall from a high window on Skid Row that broke every bone in his body, and his recovery aided by the LAPD "family"; and other pieces with titles like *Flying Through Walls* and *Give Up All Your Possessions*.

Just as important are the out-of-town residencies that have be-

come an integral part of the LAPD journey. Across America and Europe, arts presenters have rallied grant funds to bring LAPD in for residency projects that will connect local artists and audiences with the homeless populations in their cities. From Montana to Miami, from Houston to London, LAPD has been working with universities and drug rehab centers, museums and halfway houses, galleries and churches in collaborative efforts to crack the tragedy and the seemingly insoluble mystery of homelessness in the midst of plenty. Their residencies use such methods as talent shows to connect with homeless artists and performers, who then work with the company over a period of weeks to create a new performance out of personal and local political issues. These residencies sometimes produce spin-off efforts, theater initiatives that take on a life of their own among local agencies, artists, and homeless people.

Malpede's combination of attention to avant-garde aesthetics and the gritty life of the street has attracted many who have followed the

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**HOUSES,**  
**GALLERIES &**  
**CHURCHES IN**  
**COLLABORATIVE**  
**EFFORTS TO**  
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company back to L.A. to become long-term members. Some of them are artists who have found their medium in the homeless theater of LAPD, like Emma Haxton, a New Zealand native who connected with LAPD while a graduate exchange student at UCLA. She came as an intern in 1992 and immediately became immersed in the whole process, doing administration, directing and acting in the company. She gets paid for the work she does, the same as any another member of LAPD.

Like Haxton, many arts professionals have shown interest in learning what Malpede knows about how the arts can serve communities, and last summer LAPD began offering a summer intensive workshop in L.A. called "Change Exchange: Implementing Community-Based Art Programs." Change Exchange is described by Malpede as "tapping into your own resources as a starting point for

asking others to do the same. The homeless issue is not about beans and blankets but about human beings; it's not about charity but about exchange."

The intensive includes both art work and community work, offering morning workshops that teach techniques emphasizing "the integration and free flow of impulses between body, emotions, imagination, and voice." The focus is "to create a strong grounding from which to engage with others without losing yourself." Afternoon community work requires the participant to actively engage with Skid Row and the social-service agencies there, working as an advocate, and arguing on behalf of clients at welfare offices. In addition, the students work with LAPD to create shows in shelters and hotels on Skid Row.

As if all these activities weren't enough, LAPD still offers weekly performance workshops at Inner City Law Center, open to anybody who wants to come, and a cabaret at St. Vincent's Shelter, a "Beatnik cafe with candles and everything" where locals can perform.

It was through the cafe that LAPD connected a year ago with Otis Rogers, who was living in a local shelter. Proving himself to be reliable as a company member and remarkably adept at improvisation and character development, Rogers is one of many who have found a new life through working with LAPD. Now an accomplished and well-traveled actor, a paid member of the company and a producer, he lives in his own apartment in Hollywood.

Rogers was among the LAPD members who came to Raleigh, as well as Citizen Cafe, who has developed a rap persona and performs in L.A. clubs, and Sonya Mims, a versatile actress and natural pianist who has been with the company for two years, traveling to residencies in Houston and Montana. Also among the travelers was assistant director David Halenda, who is currently LAPD's biggest fan. "LAPD is the biggest change in my life," says Halenda. "I was a drunken sot living under a bush in Santa Monica, stealing beer. Now I live in a great apartment and I just directed a show. It was a great experience. I never thought I ever had a chance to do anything in the art world and I had very low self-esteem about being successful in any way. Now, after five years of being an actor in LAPD I feel really confident. I know the world. I have a grasp of how it works, the politics of it. I've really learned a lot. I've been through school, that's what it feels like."

Before an LAPD residency can get on its feet, local sponsors must raise enough money to fly the company in, house and feed them, hire local homeless performers, and pay for all the costs of production. The story of the partnership of arts and social service agencies that planned the Raleigh residency is interesting in itself, for it shatters the myth of the arts in an ivory tower. (See sidebar on page 24.)

Once the planning and funding were in place, LAPD arrived in January and visited shelters in the inner city to recruit homeless people who would work with them over a six-week period, talking about homelessness in Raleigh, bringing those issues to performance workshops at the Mason's Lodge on Blount Street, and readying the late February performances at City Gallery.

At such shelters as The Ark, LAPD members met people who were interested in participating, and answered questions like, "What's in it for me?" They talked about how they had been homeless and were now professional actors making money at something they believed in. They also explained that everybody who came to the workshop would be paid a *per diem*, and those who hung in as cast members for the performances had a chance to make as much as \$600 for their work.

More than a dozen people responded, and workshops began. As they began to probe for material, a hot local political issue surfaced. A trial was underway in a scandalous migrant labor case. An eastern North Carolina man and his mother were charged with recruiting laborers from homeless shelters, then turning them into virtual slaves on sweet potato farms. The story had come to public light when several workers escaped from a camp in Benson and fled to Raleigh, telling tales of forced labor, beatings, threats, and drugs.

LAPD workshop participants told terrifying stories about such experiences from their own lives and those of friends. Workers were lured with promises of good wages, free food, and an abundant supply of alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. Everything they wanted was supplied, all right, including drinks and crack, but later they were surprised to learn that charges for all the items they consumed, including soap and toilet paper, were debited against their wages until they were forced into "peonage," labor in servitude until the debt was paid off. Those who escaped were pursued and brought back to camp.

Another issue of vital importance to the homeless in Raleigh is the condition of the rooming houses that provide the only affordable shelter in the central city. Local homeless politician Joe Blank, who says he ran for City Council last year, and his companion Sherrie Drain told the workshop of their campaign to report substandard conditions to the Council, bringing tales of orgies, noise, violence and drugs, fire hazards and no locks on the doors, and recruited workshop members to testify with them.

City Council also needed to hear from them, said Blank and Drain, about the "aggressive panhandling" ordinance proposed by the merchants around Moore Square, where homelessness and urban renewal collide. The merchants who run the chic coffeehouses, bistros, and shops in City Market to the southeast of the park claim obnoxious panhandlers are driving away their business. If the measure were to pass, it would mean \$500 or 30 days in jail for those convicted.

These are some of the urgent matters that were folded into improv and monologues for possible inclusion in the City Gallery performance. The actors were excited about the possibilities for real change in their lives if their voices were heard.

But for LAPD art is just as important as social change.

Most art projects with the homeless, says Malpede, stop short at social goals like "giving the homeless a voice" or "empowering them to tell their stories." What interests him most is the collaborative process of crafting these unique stories into a valuable work of art.

Many greet this concept with skepticism. Seeing these people as artists involved in creating new work, he says, is beyond most presenters and critics. Malpede loves proving them wrong.

Malpede's background in free-form contact improvisation, street theater, and performance art, and his years as a homeless advocate in the depths of the welfare system, prepared him for the chaos that ensues when homelessness meets creativity.

"John's a hustler," says Carol Finley, a choreographer who was Center Stage's project coordinator for the residency. "He knows how to get what he wants. He's a hustler and a sculptor. He hustles the material out of people and then sculpts something out of it. He can see what people have to offer. He has a little something in mind. He's doesn't seem much surprised by what he gets."

His strategies for putting imagination into gear are various, like having two people tell their life stories simultaneously, and noticing the ways they accidentally intersect to bring up common themes. Or "playing as children," which quiets the self-censor and allows old memories to emerge and transform into tellable tales. Dreams are important, too, for they provide the kinds of surreal metaphors that can hold a string of seemingly unrelated images together.

Before long the workshop participants' stories are "stacking up like pancakes," says Malpede. Fantasy and memory intersect in overlapping versions of the truth of life on the street, and a performance is constructed to blend stories and jell images, interjecting them into each other.

LAPD's *Call Home* in 1991, for instance, examined the fragility of self-identity among the homeless. The piece combined three narratives that arose during improvisation exercises in workshops: 1) the legal adventures of a cast member who had witnessed a murder, but whose veracity in court was questioned because he was homeless and therefore "unreliable"; 2) a childhood memory of another member who as a boy used to fantasize that his relatives were plotting against him and falsifying the real facts of his life; and 3) LAPD's investigation of the violent death of a woman who was a company member. The script was a complicated web of questions, accusations, and testimony around a woman's body lying on the floor. To connect the three elements and underscore the theme, the actors changed places constantly, carrying the characters from one scenario to the other, blurring memory, veracity, and delusion.

If Malpede is a sculptor, he's working with very live art materials. The structure of any given piece will remain flexible throughout its run, and for good reason. At curtain time, it's often anybody's guess as to how many of the cast members will show up. Fate intervenes nightly and they can spin off into jail, hospitals, the ozone. The players learn to take on each other's roles as easily as changing shirts. They may decide to wander through the audience, doing lines in unison, racing through songs in double time. Without fail, however, the themes that emerge reveal the pain, hilarity, and confusion of life as they know it.

"The work is very personal," says Emma Haxton, who came with the group to Raleigh. "So much is involved with memory that you get to really look at who you are. It's useful for all of us, because we all tend to ramble through our lives with our eyes closed."

Probing memory for theatrical material can be a painful experience, especially for those whose existence is precarious and whose survival is at risk every day. Opening the door to childhood can bring up buried experiences such as sexual abuse, family violence, and abandonment, and all these things find their way into the finished work.

"LAPD," said critic Lucy Lippard in *Z Magazine*, "is an imperfect act of faith. Its subject is not homelessness, but its causes, deep in the human and communal psyche. They reach their audiences at a place where our fears meet even though our lives may be drastically different."

For the Raleigh workshop, in rehearsal at the Mason's Lodge on Blount Street, things are no different. A dozen participants are contributing monologues, dialogues, and movement passages revealing the loneliness, bitterness, longing, anger, and regret that haunt their lives. *Citizen Kane* remembers a racist incident from his youth that marked him for life. Alta Clark remembers a lost love. Gertrude Quarles and Mike (The Reverend) Moore retrace the agonies of picking tobacco from dawn till dark. Everybody works together to remember a story from Military Tom, who is not here, about his slave labor on the cucumber farm, getting the details down: 65 cents a day, a green ticket for every bushel, your whole body turns black, cold showers, no doors or windows in the sleeping shack.

They hold an imaginary City Market Merchants Association meeting: "Drug users coming into my restaurant, people who are intoxicated, you supported our redevelopment of the



Alta Clark tells her story. photo: Erin Beach

## What Do You Mean by "Community"? The Art of Partnership in Raleigh

Artists have been working toward social goals in communities for decades, but not since the WPA in the '30s has there been such support for this work among funders, presenters, and governmental agencies. LAPD's residency in Raleigh is an example of how sophisticated the infrastructure for community-based art work has become.

The process of "LAPD Inspects Raleigh" actually began in summer 1992 when North Carolina State University's Center Stage, one of the strongest presenters in the region, started meeting with local agencies to talk about how the arts might become involved in the issues around homelessness in Raleigh. Center Stage Director Sharon Herr and her cohorts, assistant director Mark Tulbert and education/outreach coordinator Toni Thorpe, have a fundamental belief in theater as a medium for communication, and they wanted a long, intense project that would exemplify the potential for theater to address the burning social issues of our time. They wanted more than the perfunctory one-night stand that some community arts residencies provide.

Their partners, with art and social goals of their own, included Raleigh/Wake Coalition for the Homeless, a referral agency in direct contact with the community; Voices, A Creative Community, who work with literacy and homelessness, and City Gallery, which sits on Moore Square near a soup kitchen, two shelters, a job placement service, and a transitional home. Together they invited LAPD to Raleigh to help them "present life as it is lived by the homeless of our area in such a way that a rich interaction is provided between the homeless, area service providers, local artists, the artists of LAPD, and the public at large," to quote the grant proposal.

In addition, the partners put together a task force/advisory group including The Ark Shelter, Raleigh Rescue Mission, Salvation Army Shelter, Wake Tech, The Women's Center, Raleigh City Council, Wake County Commission on Homelessness, and Urban Ministries Center. They shared out the tasks of planning and production for the residency, as well as putting their ideas and resources to work on each others' needs around future projects with, for, and by the homeless.

John Malpede and LAPD Assistant Director David Halenda flew in from L.A. months earlier to work with this eclectic coalition on a residency structure that would offer a broad spectrum of experiences, beginning with the Center Stage audience and the students at NCSU. The plan included a panel discussion on community-based art, a lecture demonstration of LAPD's method, workshops in performance, an ecumenical Ash Wednesday Service with LAPD, and classes and events examining such subjects as "poverty and representation" and homeless women's issues. This panoramic curriculum, designed to serve everybody from academics to activists, brought into the circle of involvement such campus entities as the University Scholars Forum, the NCSU Women's Center, the Multidisciplinary Studies Program, the English Department, and the Chaplain's Cooperative Ministry.

Agencies and foundations who came on board to support the project with funding were the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Arts Partners Program (administered by the Association of Performing Arts Presenters), the National Endowment for the Arts (through Southern Arts Federation), and the North Carolina Arts Council. In-kind support was provided by the Independent Weekly, Widow's Sons Lodge #4, Excelsior Lodge #21, the Meredith Guest House, the City of Raleigh Parks & Recreation Department, and the Raleigh Civic & Convention Center.

Besides providing the resources to pull this off, the community benefits in many ways when this many groups gather around a project with this much visibility and integrity. First and most important, a lot of people spent time looking at and learning about homelessness.

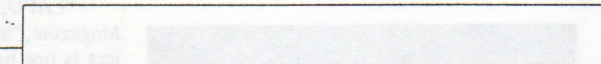
Then came action: the Task Force brought together for the first time a wide variety of groups whose mission touches on homelessness. Their partnership recognized and validated each others' work, and many of these connections have continued past the project, providing ongoing pooling of resources. Some participants are working to develop a continuing performance venue for homeless artists, such as a cabaret in one of the shelters.

Local activists, some of them homeless, hooked up with the LAPD workshop group to attend several City Council meetings, testifying in special sessions on regulating the substandard conditions of the rooming houses and on the matter of "aggressive panhandling." Out of these sessions may come some real changes for Raleigh's homeless.

Since the performance, Sharon Herr has been contacted at NCSU by people who are intrigued by what they have heard of the residency: a local writer wants to help organize the cabaret, a visual artist who has never heard of Center Stage wants to get involved, the Affordable Housing Coalition in Durham wants to consult, two NCSU design students are looking for community input on a class assignment to design a "belongings carrier" to be used by homeless people.

Finally, and certainly not least, the audience for the performance was packed to the rafters, filled with people from all walks of life who were more than an audience—they were part of the partnership and felt they had a stake in it.

That's community.



Moore Park area and now you're abandoning us, these beggars are making \$20-30,000 a day and unless this ordinance gets passed we are the ones who are going to pay for this problem!"

They are dressed in street multi: a stocking cap, a bright orange highway-visibility vest, a dressy polyester evening suit, gold bangles, earrings spelling out "love," a T-shirt reading "Active Collection—100% Genuine Quality," a matted black wig, circles of rouge.

They begin to work on the labor camp scene. Otis plays the job boss. He cuts a deal with Halenda who is a City Market bar owner. For a retainer he'll deliver vegetables for the bar on a regular basis and at the same time rid the bar owner of his "homeless problem" by hauling people to his camp, getting them out of Moore Square for good.

Malpede pulls a group of chairs together in the shape of an imaginary van and Otis and John Hoyle start cramming people into it while they storm through an improv. The dialogue is a madhouse of references, threats, wisecracks, and hallucinations:

"Get back in there!"

"I got a sexual problem!"

"Hi ho Hi ho, it's off to work we go."

"I can't go, I'm not riding with no perverts."

"Who needs to urinate?"

"Can I drive?"

"What about our MIAs and POWs? Don't you want to bring these boys home?"

"I need some medication!"

"Bring 'em home!"

"Pass them rocks."

"Some of you people have a serious problem."

A few days later the workshop has a car full of visitors from an arts conference in Durham, the Community Arts Revival being sponsored by Alternate ROOTS, a southeastern regional artists' organization. Artists and cultural workers from all over the country have gathered in Durham for four days of talks and performances. LAPD is on a roster of field trips to arts sites throughout the Triangle area. Carol Finley is the tour guide. They pull up to the Mason's Hall and Carol goes to the door and knocks. She hears a scratching, a barking. The door opens and there's Malpede on his knees, a guard dog. Halenda appears, a watchman, and asks what she wants. She tells him. He asks her if everybody in the group is cool. She says they are. He says they can come in two at a time. As they enter, they are thoroughly frisked by Sonya. They find themselves in the midst of an argument at the farmhouse headquarters of the Blue Van Gang. They are bullied and yanked about. People ask them urgent and garrulous questions. After about 15 minutes of this, Malpede calls off the scene and everyone sits down in a circle for some Q and A.

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Everyone is introduced and talks about where they all came from and why they are there.

Finally it's opening night. You never know what to expect from an LAPD performance. Some people say great art is that which holds humanity up to the light in a way not done before, in a way to jar the soul. If you decide to take a chance on this performance, it might be great art or it might be another nerve-wracking night on the streets with the human family. At the very least, it will make the homeless visible and you won't be able to look away. But be forewarned. LAPD's motto is, "Do you want the cosmetic version or the real deal?" The real deal comes with rough edges. It might be scary and loud and hard to follow. And you might walk out exhilarated, amused, and inspired, or offended and confused, wondering what the hell just happened to you. And it will be just like the real deal. Just like Raleigh. Just like life.

The City Gallery shows tough contemporary work and is a great choice for a venue. Sitting right on Moore Square, it's literally part of the everyday life of the homeless of this city.

LAPD has set up the space so the players' backs are to the huge windows looking out to the Square, and that the audience, to see the performance, has to face the reality of the chaos just beyond the glass. The piece, with its various themes grafted onto each other like a Frankenstein thing, is fairly linear for LAPD. The merchants complain to the City Council, Otis and the Blue Van Gang cut their deal, the homeless are recruited and abused, a side scene involves Alta and Emma as Otis' wife and child. Throughout, individual monologues from the workshops are superimposed on the action, addressed directly to the audience, sometimes simultaneously: Cane's story of his teenage terror, Sonya's speech about migrant-labor life, Alta's heartrending tale of her marriage to the camp boss, the accidental drowning of their tiny son and his reaching out to comfort her ("I know he's done some terrible things, but it's wonderful when a man can reach outside his own pain to comfort others").

Additionally, however, there are the distractions. There is literally constant motion throughout the room, people coming and going with purpose but no explanation. Sonya spends the first half of the show in the audience, wearing a hood and a fake mustache, audibly panhandling the customers: "Is that all you got? Oh, sure, you gave me your last dollar? Let me see your wallet!" Three or four women from the cast have their own cafe table set up in the audience with a small lamp, drinks, and various inexplicable piles of trash. They are constantly fixing their hair, pulling things out of their plastic shopping bags. At one point, for no reason that is apparent, Sherrie and Gertrude bolt onto the stage with guns, doing what appears to be a bump-and-grind burlesque, while another woman is cooking on-stage in the background.

David Halenda appears in two diametrically opposed roles. At one moment he is Cosmo Topper, the City Market bar owner, indignant about the human trash lounging on his doorstep, the next he appears in a mask made of a pair of black tights, a crazed Batman look, and dashes around pretending surveillance like a secret agent, mumbling into a broken portable radio: "10-4, 10-4, possible homicide, over and out!" He winds up in the blue van ("Destination unknown! 64-64!") just as someone from the street, who has been earlier ejected from the space for being violent, throws himself against the window, apparently targeting Otis: "Hey! You! Faggot! I'm talking to you! You're a faggot!" He bashes on the glass as Halenda throws himself to the floor shouting into his radio, "Possible faggot! Possible faggot! 413!!" The intruder is reasoned with by gallery personnel, but not long afterward, a police car drives slowly by, shining its lights into the eyes of the audience.

Emma Haxton, as Alta and Otis' spoiled daughter, is seen crawling through the audience, under people's feet, or lying on the stage drawing in a notebook. She too reappears at the end of the piece as an adult character, dressed conservatively.

hands of a homeless person she was trying to help: "I've tried, but I just don't understand where their anger comes from." And the lights go down. Everybody takes a bow with Malpede on the floor barking like a dog.

After the piece I sit with Alta over a glass of wine and she tells me about her life. She'd been living at the Ark, but came in late one night and was thrown out. Right now she's staying with Sonya at the LAPD apartment. The residency has been a breakthrough experience for her. She doesn't know what comes next, but she wants to go on writing and performing. In the process of the residency she faced some painful things from her past and found herself as a writer. She asks me how she can nurture that part of herself, hold on to it. I tell her to seek out more workshops and projects like this one. I give her some leads to the ones I know about.

Later I find out from Carol Finley that John Hoyle, the energetic twentysomething cast member with the mischievous look in his eye, is out of the shelters and has used his performance fee to put down a first month's rent on his own apartment. Sherrie and Joe called to say they've "gotten into something better." Many of the performers call Center Stage regularly to say where they are, how they are, wondering what's up.

And that's always the question the skeptics ask: What's up after LAPD leaves town? Does anything lasting remain? Does LAPD make any real difference in the landscape of homelessness?

"Of course," swears Malpede. "It's a miracle cure. Every single person who had ever participated in or even witnessed an LAPD performance is now fully employed and paying taxes."

"Yes and no," David Halenda told me in a more serious vein. "The residencies don't always create the kind of change that people are expecting, which is: Are (theater) groups started where we go, are they successful, do people get off the streets, do they make this incredible personality change? Some of that happens, but the lasting changes are subtle. People on the streets—any human being really—develop these rhythms, certain patterns in the world that really kind of lock them in and they don't see new things. What this work really does is open that door a little bit so other things can enter—possibilities. Like going back to school, communicating better with other people, trusting people more. Sometimes a community is created—even though it's not a community that an arts council would see because it's on the streets, folks hanging out together. You know...community."

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