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John Malpede and Henriëtte Brouwers of Los Angeles Poverty Department (Photo by Danny Liao)

JORDAN RIEFE ([HTTPS://WWW.LAWEEKLY.COM/GUEST-AUTHOR/JORDAN-RIEFE/](https://www.laweekly.com/guest-author/jordan-riefe/)) * DECEMBER 16, 2019

LOS ANGELES POVERTY DEPARTMENT: THE EQUALIZERS PERFORM THE VOICES OF SKID ROW

People
2019

(<https://www.laweekly.com/l-a-weeklys-people-2019-issue-is-here/>) There are two LAPDs overseeing the downtown area. One whose motto claims to “protect and serve,” and another which actually does so. Founded by acclaimed performance artist John Malpede in 1985, the Los Angeles Poverty Department (<https://www.lapovertydept.org>)

is the nation’s first performance group comprised of homeless and formerly homeless practitioners.

As advocates for Skid Row through the lens of art and culture, their mission is to sustain the community and its members’ “artistic and personal development,” which they pursue through performance and theatrical projects speaking directly to the challenges faced by this unique neighborhood.

“The notion is to create community on Skid Row and to get the real deal out, to have an unmediated voice of the community,” Malpede tells the *Weekly*. “If anyone cares about solving something perceived as a social ill, then they might as well be grounded in reality. There hasn’t always been the will. And even when there is the will, there’s not a huge amount of work being done.”

LAPD associate director, author and artist Henriëtte Brouwers agrees, adding, “It can be done. It’s where you put your priorities.” Since 2000, Brouwers has produced, directed and performed in theatrical works, and is an integral part of the entire operation. “LAPD would not be what it is,” says Malpede, “without our work together.”

In recent years, Malpede and Brouwers have curated the [Skid Row History Museum and Archive](https://www.lapovertydept.org/skid-row-history-museum-archive) (<https://www.lapovertydept.org/skid-row-history-museum-archive>), a downtown space that explores gentrification issues. On view through mid-January are sculptures and paintings by Nick Paul and Diane Prozeller. At the age of 38, Paul is a two-time cancer survivor and has been sober for 18 years. Prozeller, who cites Salvador Dali and Frida Kahlo among her inspirations, received an associate’s degree from Pasadena City College in art.

In October, the Festival For All Skid Row Artists offered a platform for over 125 community practitioners to perform or show their work. A biennial parade acknowledges those responsible for transformative efforts like the Downtown Women’s Center, co-founded by a homeless woman whose first name was Rosa and activist Jill Halverson, which has been servicing the medical needs of homeless women since 1978.

A 2013 recipient of the Doris Duke Performing Artist Fellowship, Malpede has taught at UCLA, NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, and The Amsterdam School for Advanced Research in Theater and Dance, and has produced projects with communities in the U.S., U.K., France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Bolivia. The list of awards Malpede has received are legion — New York’s Dance Theater Workshop Bessie Creation Award, San Francisco Art Institute’s Adaline Kent Award, L.A. Theater Alliance Ovation Award, and grants from the NEA, California Arts Council, City of Los Angeles’ COLA fellowship and many more.

“Everyone needs a reason to get out of bed in the morning, beyond coffee,” Malpede responds when asked why he has fought this uphill battle for the past 35 years. “Engaging people in all their dimensionality — their street smarts, their sense of humor, all they’ve lived through — that is what motivates me.”

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