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The world responds to the Walk the Talk Archive

By Morgan Owen LA Downtown News Staff Writer
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Los Angeles Poverty Department's Walk the Talk Parade was held in April. (Monica Nouwens/Submitted)

It was standing room only at Skid Row's Historical Museum as the Los Angeles Poverty Department screened a series of newly added materials to its digital Walk the Talk Archive. The videos were a series of responses filmed by people who have used the archive, produced by the LA Poverty Department as part of its Walk the Talk initiative, where it honors influential members of the Skid Row community.

As he introduced the five respondents featured at the screening, John Malpede, founder of LA Poverty Department, explained how Walk the Talk evolved out of LA Poverty Department's performance archives.

"In 2012, the Community Redevelopment Agency targeted us at a conference for the National Endowment for the Arts, and they asked us to develop a public art project," Malpede said.

"Initially, I said we would want to do something like the Hollywood Walk of Fame to acknowledge the people that have done transformative work in Skid Row. ... Instead, we got (Walk the Talk.)"

LA Poverty Department's Walk the Talk Parade honors activists and community members who have done transformative work in Skid Row through a biennial parade of performances. The performances each take place at locations integral to that honoree's story that are strung together along a parade route. Thousands of people in Downtown LA came together to view this year's Walk the Talk Parade, which took place in April.

To create each performance, the LA Poverty Department conducts one-hour and two-hour interviews with each honoree and distills them into 10-15 minute videos. The live performances and the interviews used to create them are all recorded and stored in LA Poverty Department's Walk the Talk Archive.

"The LA Poverty Department had been keeping an archive of the voices of the community for the past several decades, and not only that, they were using performance to activate (the archive) and also gather material," said Clancy Cornell, one of LA Poverty Department's volunteers who helps manage the digital archive.

The responses

Victoria Romano, one of the respondents, said her biggest mistake when she started working with the LA Poverty Department's Walk the Talk Archive was grammatical. Instead of saying "in" Skid Row, Romano kept saying "on" Skid Row. At the time, she didn't realize how important that distinction was.

By referring to Skid Row as a concept, Romano inadvertently diminished Skid Row's identity as one of Downtown LA's vibrant neighborhoods, reducing a community to a concept of poverty. And that distinction is what the LA Poverty Department's Walk the Talk Archive is about.

In their responses, each individual spoke about how they've used the archive and how it has influenced them. For example, one of the respondents, a Vancouver-based collective called Right to Remain, used the video to engage in discussions with the homeless community it serves in British Columbia.

Douglas Mungin, a professor at Solano Community College, uses the Walk the Talk Archive in his classroom. His response reviewed how he has used LA Poverty Department's interviews with prominent Skid Row community members to explore how Skid Row has used activism and civil disobedience to bring about change in the community.

Lorinda Hawkins Smith, another respondent, pointed out that the archive isn't just for academics and professionals. For her, the archives serve as a way to create shared experiences amongst those living in Skid Row and create a sense of validity around her experience of homelessness.

"Yes, I can tell my story to people," Lorinda said. "But being able to pull from the archives ... it feels like I'm not alone. I'm not just this voice crying in the wilderness. ... And it's not just professionals, but people who are experiencing similar stories as mine."

Lorinda became homeless after fleeing from domestic violence. Unfortunately, that meant breaking custody agreements, and both her children were taken from her. She ended up living at the Union Rescue Mission, but as her time limit approached, it looked like she would have to move onto the streets. At the last minute, the LA Poverty Department came to the rescue.

Because Hawkins Smith was involved with the LA Poverty Department while it ran the Change Exchange, a program where people moved from across the country to Skid Row to experience homelessness, the LA Poverty Department was able to find her housing in a Single Room Occupancy unit at the Panama Hotel. From there, she moved into permanent housing and ultimately regained custody of her son.

Now, Hawkins Smith is an award-winning filmmaker, playwright, actor, author and advocate. She recently published a book, "Justice? Or... Just Me? The Bite," the first of a trilogy detailing her experiences as a domestic violence survivor and homelessness.

About LA Poverty Department

With the largest concentration of homeless people in any neighborhood in the nation, and as the poorest community in Los Angeles, it's estimated that almost half of Skid Row's population is homeless, approximately 2,000 of whom live unsheltered and on the streets. Those numbers have been Skid Row's legacy for over a century, with little thought to the culture and identity of the people who live there.

John Malpede founded the LA Poverty Department in 1985 to create a theater group for people like Hawkins Smith. It became the first performance group in the country composed primarily of homeless or formerly homeless individuals.

Over the years, the LA Poverty Department's success in cultural activism brought acclaim. It became a small organization with a big voice. Since 1985, LA Poverty Department has started the first annual Festival for All Skid Row Artists and initiated their biennial Walk the Talk Parade.

For most of its history, the LA Poverty Department has been, like those it served, without a place to call home until it had an opportunity to open up the Skid Row History Museum and Archive in 2015. Although the digital archive is now available to the public online, the Skid Row History Museum and Archive are open to the public on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturdays from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Current exhibitions include "Blue Book - Green Paper," "The World Responds to the Walk the Talk Archive" and "How to House 7,000 People in Skid Row." Both exhibitions, "Blue Book - Green Paper" and "The World Responds to the Walk the Talk Archive," will be on display until the end of January.

Skid Row History Museum & Archive

250 S. Broadway, Los Angeles

[lapovertydept.org/LA Poverty Department-history](http://lapovertydept.org/LA-Poverty-Department-history)

<https://bit.ly/WalktheTalkArchive>

Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday, and by appointment