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BEATS OF BELONGING

Skid Row festival drums up hope and connection through art

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Beats of Belonging

Skid Row festival drums up hope and connection through art

By Bridgette M. Redman

LA Downtown News Contributor

Poverty doesn't have to be miserable 24/7. No matter what a person's economic status, joy is possible—and that joy can serve as resistance to oppression in all its forms.

This year's 16th annual Festival for All Skid Row Artists carries the unofficial theme of "Joy is Resistance," as the Los Angeles Poverty Department calls upon Skid Row artists to stand up to "the government's assault on small arts groups and vulnerable communities."

The festival will be held from noon to 4 p.m. Oct. 18-19 at Gladys Park, featuring nonstop music, performances and visual art, showcasing the talents of more than 150 artists and performers who live on Skid Row.

Even before the flyers went out, organizer Henriëtte Brouwers said she had artists contacting her, eager to participate.

"There are always new performers in Skid Row," Brouwers said. "We are giving theater workshops at the Skid Row campus and we're meeting a lot of new people who are really excited about having a place they can perform and are signing up."

The Festival began in 2010 after a joint study by the Los Angeles Poverty Department and the Urban Institute documented the role of arts and culture in Skid Row. Researchers found that the neighborhood's creative energy comes from the ground up, often initiated by the residents themselves.

However, because so many of the artists were unhoused and difficult to track, re-

searchers lacked solid data showing who lived and created there. The festival became a way to celebrate and document the artistic community.

"We said, let's just make a festival and everybody who identifies as an artist can come and we'll get their information—that's who we're going to prove there are all these artists," Brouwers said. "A lot of people came and said this is so cool, we have to do this again. Now we have a database of 1,500 people over the years."

This year's performers will be a mix of newcomers and those who have been participating for all 16 years.

The house band will be the Skid Row Drummers with other artists including Crushow, Silkie Harris, Robin Hoodloom, Olusheyi Adeeko Banjo, Sir Oliver, Hylen Burt, Mello Bluez and Swami Doni, Urban Voices Project and Los Cubanos.

"Every festival since the beginning, we have had Skid Row drummers who have Djembe and dun dun African drums," Brouwers said. "They are always the house band. Sometimes people dance to them, but often the drummers are drumming and then someone starts improvising, just talking poetry with the drummers."

Brouwers said that musicians will share the stage with theater artists, improv artists and people reading poetry. Sometimes there will be soloists, sometimes there will be entire choirs or bands.

On the basketball courts, the public is invited to explore their artistic sides, perhaps even discovering abilities they didn't know they had.

"We set up a whole bunch of tables that we call creativity stations," Brouwers said. "There are easels and people. It's an exhibition of people making their own paintings, drawings, or buttons."

Artist-led workshops are offered by Studio 526, Creative I, Piece by Piece and Doodles Without Borders. The LA Public Library and other community groups will offer engagement and quality of life activities along with space for kids to learn poetry writing.

Brouwers said each year Hayk Makhmuryan leads a community painting project where anyone is invited to doodle on a large sheet of paper. Makhmuryan has been working in Skid Row since 2008. He expanded The People Concern's Studio 526 from the former Lamp Arts Program, making it open to all community residents and prompting the perspective that equi-



Photos from last year's Festival for All Skid Row Artists.

(Los Angeles Poverty Department/Submitted)

table access to arts and cultural spaces is a human right.

Brouwers said she is hopeful that Jen Hofer, a local poet, translator and professor at Otis School for Design, will be returning as she has for many years.

"She types with a typewriter and types poems for people on demand," Brouwers said. "It's really sweet. She has a conversation and then she types up a poem that people can take the piece of paper home with them."

As the founding organization, the Los Angeles Poverty Department performs every year. All their artists are paid for their performances and for their work organizing the festival.

"It's a real community event," Brouwers said. "It's giving jobs back to the community."

The members of the theater troupe also interview all of the artists who participate in the festival and those interviews are later distributed for free throughout the community in the form of a tabloid newspaper.

The COVID-19 pandemic had its effect on the festival, bringing in many new people to the community and the festival. Brouwers describes it as a positive change.

"After COVID there were a whole bunch of new people and they were really embraced by the rest of the community," Brouwers said. "They make new connections and they find their place within the community which is very nice. It brings people together."

While the festival is free for artists and visitors, the Los Angeles Poverty Department, which was the first theater group for unhoused people in the United States, they are hoping that people will learn more about their organization and be moved to support it.

The organization has been around for 40 years and has been funded by many of the federal agencies that were closed by DOGE, or the Department of Government Efficiency, this year. Brouwers said that like many small arts organizations, they are struggling to survive. Next month, they are planning to start a GoFundMe campaign to help keep the Skid Row History Museum and Archive open.

These struggles are what led to their unofficial theme with their marketing material stating, "Joy is the name of the game, and there is never any shortage of it at the Festival for All Skid Row Artists."



The Festival for All Skid Row Artists returns on Oct. 18-19 at Gladys Park.

(Los Angeles Poverty Department/Submitted)

16TH ANNUAL FESTIVAL FOR ALL SKID ROW ARTISTS

WHEN: 12 p.m. to 4 p.m., Oct. 18 and Oct. 19

WHERE: Gladys Park/General Jeff Park, corner of 6th Street and Gladys Avenue, Los Angeles

COST: Free

INFO: lapovertydept.org/