



Artist Jaiye Kamson and her painting "Brick Red Waves". Credit: Courtesy of The People Concern

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Using Art to Heal the Unhoused on Skid Row

Jaiye Kamson and the Los Angeles Poverty Department are using creativity to restore dignity, hope, and connection.

BY NADIRA JAMERSON October 22, 2025

They're often overlooked by society — and even blamed for not being able to overcome a [centuries-long, systemic system](#) that seeks to keep poor people at the bottom. But Jaiye Kamson, a multimedia artist and archive assistant with the [Los Angeles Poverty Department \(LAPD\)](#), says unhoused people are more than the prejudices and stereotypes placed on them. They're leaders, community activists, and even artists.

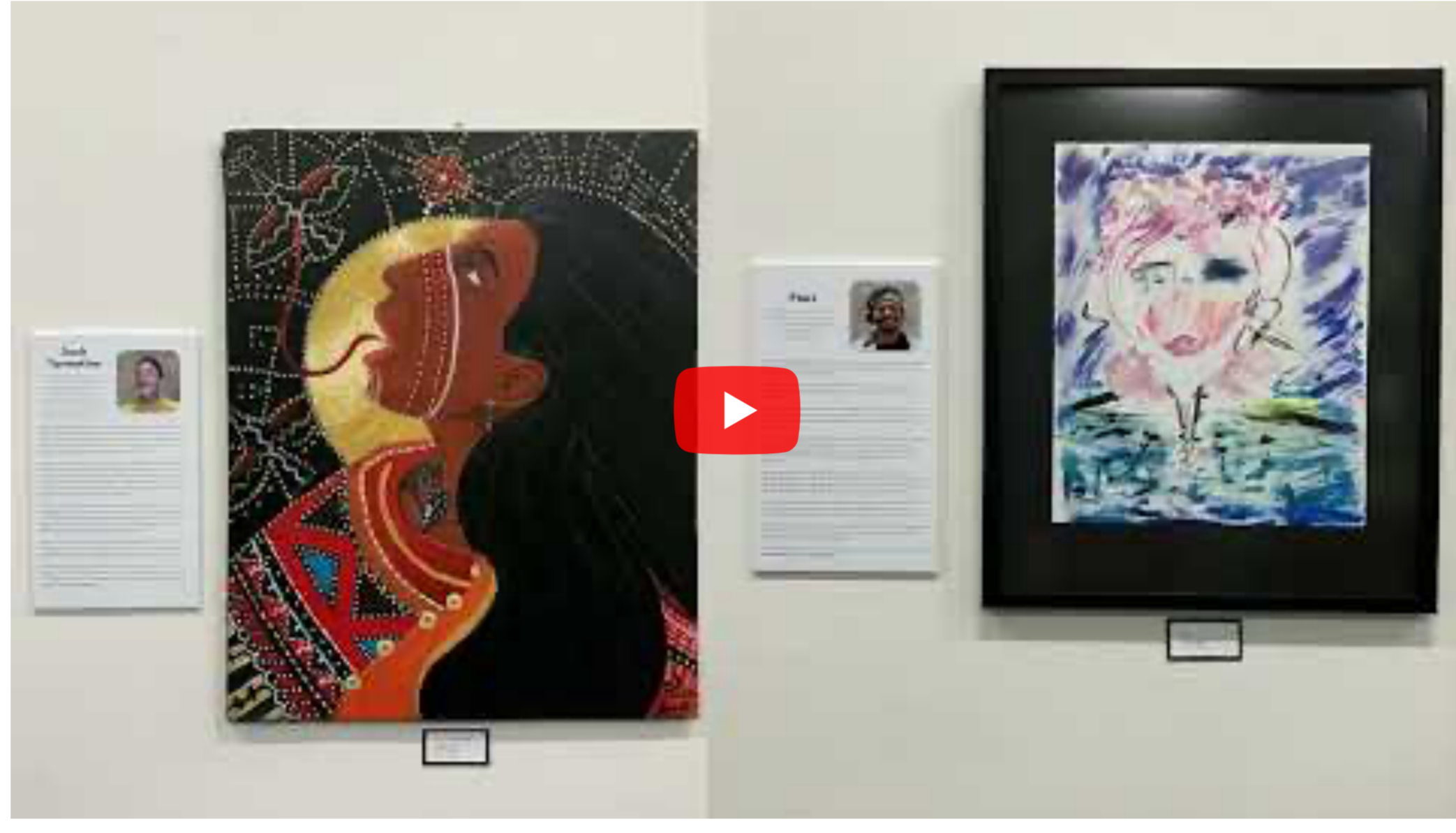
Kamson knows that first-hand. She spent several years unhoused herself.

"Art helped me through that experience by giving me something to focus on," she says. "The art I created through that experience wasn't always positive because I wasn't in a positive place in that time in my life. But what it did give me is a sense of control over something. It allowed me to conceptualize what I was going through and put it on paper, and in that way, give me a sense of ownership over it."

Now, Kamson uses art to bring dignity, support, and joy to folks living on Skid Row — an area in Downtown Los Angeles that has been home to a large unhoused population since the 1930s.

Through public art installations, theatrical performances, and community-led storytelling projects, Kamson says her work as part of the LAPD has helped to "uplift people out of poverty."

Founded in 1985, LAPD is the first arts organization in the nation composed primarily of currently and formerly unhoused individuals. Since 2010 it has engaged over 900 Skid Row artists — a number that reflects both the power of art and the scale of the crisis.



In 2024, [11 million](#) Americans sought help from a homeless service — a 12% increase from the previous year, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness. And Black Americans are disproportionately represented in this group. Though they only make up 13% of the total U.S. population, Black people account for [almost 40%](#) of unhoused folks. As [prices rise](#) and [access to affordable housing declines](#), organizations such as LAPD may be needed now more than ever.

In a conversation with Word In Black, Kamson shares how her work with the Los Angeles Poverty Department as a Black, formerly unhoused artist is filling this growing need — and why art may be the key to healing for unhoused folks.

Word In Black: How would you describe the art that you create with the Los Angeles Poverty Department?

Jaiye Kamson: The art I create is personal in nature, and it's an expression of myself.

WIB: Black Americans make up a disproportionate amount of unhoused folks. As a Black artist, how does your work directly speak to the Black unhoused population?

JK: Art speaks as a megaphone to the problems we face. We witness, and then we perform pieces to the public that may not be aware of the situation at hand or aware of the history because it goes all the way back to like the 80s and 70s. Really, you can take it back all the way to the beginnings of America.

WIB: What is one performance you've done recently that you've seen have an impact?

JK: We basically did a short performance honoring a Skid Row blues singer called S.S. Jones. He did this coalition of Skid Row musicians, where he would rent out the band space where they could sign up. He had that running for a number of years back in the 80s. It stopped after a flood happened, and they couldn't get the band back together again, but at its height, it had like 22 bands going. We did a performance based on that at the Skid Row Care Campus outside, and then again at the annex.

As LAPDers, we document. We document the footsteps, the successes, and the pitfalls of the community as it's been going through the ages. We create plays to introduce folks to their history so that they know that they come from a long-standing work of activists, and community, and people just like them — to give them a sense of hope and empowerment.

WIB: How can other artists and community leaders create resources for unhoused folks?

JK: When you're unhoused, you have no place to go, and there's nothing to do with your time. So you need some place to go, some third place where you could just get away and just be yourself, where you can create. It should be free for everyone, and I think it needs to be promoted at places like clinics, at community centers, at drop-ins. People need to reach out to the community.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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NADIRA JAMERSON

✉ nadira.jamerson@localmedia.org | 📷

Writer and content creator Nadira Jamerson is the Digital Editor for Word In Black. Her focus is to create space for Black individuals to express the complexities of their communities and identities through an honest and inspiring lens.

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