



WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS

Faith, hope and clarity on Skid Row

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Distraught, displaced, dispossessed individuals walk in a zombie-like daze. Others threaten to jump out of their skins. Agonized cries juxtapose with maniacal laughter. The smell of putrid waste, body fluids included. Shit happens on Skid Row — a bust, a score, a feud, a death. Makeshift homes threaten to blow away and unkempt kids look for missing parents. Yet there's an overlay of defiant hope that determinedly overshadows the vicissitudes of human peril. Although the odds overwhelm, survivors dwell in these parts and, baby, they have stories to tell within these 40 square blocks that lie from Third to Seventh streets, and from Los Angeles Street to Central Avenue.

Mollie Lowery, past executive director of Lamp Community, which provides shelter and services to the poor and homeless confronting mental illness, has been dubbed the Mother Teresa of Skid Row. In 1985, she co-founded Lamp Community's forerunner, the Los Angeles Men's Place.

"In the mid-'60s," Lowery recalls, "the powers-that-be in L.A. decided to preserve its Skid Row and provide the basics to survive so that the folks there would not venture into other areas of the city and county. This policy continues to this day."

The voices of Skid Row express the same hopefulness that characterizes the rest of Los Angeles. Here, hope may manifest itself in the desire to evolve, transform or merely get through another day battling demons, real and imagined.

I began my regular excursions here five years ago, associating myself with members of Lamp Community who harbored one shared want: to be heard. Many of Skid Row's denizens are mentally ill and labeled "crazy" without acknowledging the other qualities they possess. If you look closely and listen with your heart, you'll find the best of L.A. in many individuals who call the Row home. Whether that home is a cardboard box, tent or room at one of the hotels for those who are transitioning into a more conventional zone, these folks defy the stereotype that routinely reduces them to subhuman status.

Skid Rowers share many of the other traits that typify Los Angeles' most revered citizens: determination, resilience, humor, political consciousness, sexiness, daring and artistic impulses that spring from the need to be treated with a certain degree of respect and dignity. Has-beens and comebacks, falling stars and more than one Phoenix rising. Crazy? You betcha, but craziness that is often characterized by a lack of self-pity and a surplus of self-awareness.

I spend several hours a week at the St. George Hotel, encouraging many of the neighborhood's residents to express

themselves through writing and performing. The St. George was once trumpeted as “the headquarters for theatrical people” in a 1914 newspaper ad. Nearly a century later, the hotel’s theatricality is in high gear, my dear. Theatrical as in mad, outrageous, often fearless and always colorful.

After a dramatic fall, in which the hotel became one of downtown’s most notorious buildings, the St. George had a major face-lift, thanks to the efforts of the Skid Row Housing Trust. Currently offering shelter for 88 individuals, the St. George also features supportive services, including substance-abuse rehabilitation and medical and social programs. Services are provided by 12 partnering agencies in a model program called the Skid Row Collaborative, and are funded by a federal initiative.

Certainly the generosity of Angelenos’ contributions to those suffering in the aftermath of Katrina will likely eclipse any potential donations that are desperately needed by the destitute in our own back yard. Will it take an earthquake to shake our sensibilities and realize some of the best of L.A. can be found on Skid Row?