

A Parade Celebrates the Immigrant and Senior Communities of New York's Lower East Side

At the LES Citizens Parade, senior citizens of Chinese, Hispanic, and Jewish descent pretend to be a moving company, surrounded by cardboard boxes that carry immigrant stories.

by Tobi Elkin
June 21, 2018



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(image courtesy Laura Nova)

The LES Citizens Parade is a celebration of the migration and settlement experiences of longtime residents of New York's multilingual Lower East Side neighborhood. What's unique about the hybrid piece, billed as both a procession and a dance party, is that the performers are all seniors — of Chinese, Hispanic, and Jewish descent — who frequent four senior centers in lower Manhattan (Henry Street Settlement's Senior Center, LaGuardia Neighborhood Senior Center, Two Bridges Senior Housing, and the Weinberg Center for Balanced Living at the Manny Cantor Center). Nearly 50 participants in all, they range in age from 60 to 95 and all took part in movement workshops from January through May. The LES Citizens Parade, part of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's [River to River Festival](#) program, is literally described as a "moving company" of older adults and guest artists.

The performance, taking place Friday, June 22 and Sunday, June 24, will kick off with a procession as each participant/performer carries a box that symbolizes something special from their personal lives — the one thing they'd choose to take with them if they had to move. Cardboard moving boxes are emblazoned with labels such as "Shoes," "Fruit," and "Spices," the latter representing the joy of making Chinese curried chicken, for instance. A box labeled "Clothes" points to the items of clothing that are important to hold onto.



(image by Rosalind Aparicio-Ramirez for LES Citizens Parade)

The boxes are inscribed and metaphorically filled with the stories that participants shared with workshop organizers over a five-month period. "Floats," or moving carts, are stacked high with cardboard boxes labeled with phrases including "We Belong Here," "Legacy," "Determination, and "Resilience."

Participants' immigration stories and personal anecdotes informed the choreography and lyricism of each dance sequence. One dance involves packing up and trying on clothing, for example. There are also "Storybox" dances, a mash-up of jazz and flamenco forms, traditional Israeli folk and Jewish dances, and Chinese fan dances. (The performance features live music and an original piece composed by musical director Ezra Bloom, with a band led by Paul Shapiro.)

The performance piece is the creation of [Laura Nova](#), a Lower East Side-based visual artist, and [Naomi Haas Goldberg](#), founding artistic director of [Dances for a Variable Population](#), which offers community-based age-friendly movement workshops for people of varied abilities. Artist and choreographers led the workshops: Yehuda Hyman taught a series of Israeli folkdances and performed a Jewish bottle dance, Bernard Dove led jazz, flamenco, and Latino-inspired forms, while Margaret Yuen, who has her own dance company, Red Silk Dancers, taught Chinese fan dances. Hyman, Dove, and Yuen also perform in the LES Citizens Parade.



(image by Rosalind Aparicio-Ramirez for LES Citizens Parade)

For Hyman, the piece resonates personally: His father emigrated from Poland in 1939 and settled on Ludlow St. in the bustling heart of the Lower East Side.

In the parade, Hyman dances with 95-year-old Poa Shen Wong, who is a long-time practitioner of kung fu, which she learned in Hong Kong and has been practicing since 1982. The interplay is one example of different cultures and generations learning from one another.

"I think it's fun...we want to learn something new and be part of the community, plus we're getting exercise," said participant Anna Chiu, during a rehearsal.

"I think it's important to see older adults who have been living here in the community. The dances are built from social, cultural dance forms that are alive and well on the Lower East Side," Goldberg Haas said. "And we're asking the question, 'what is important to you? If you had to bring something to the neighborhood, what is it?'"



(image by Rosalind Aparicio-Ramirez for LES Citizens Parade)

The piece speaks potently not only to immigration and migration, but the hyper-gentrification that's rapidly changing the face of cities globally. "I hope that people will think more deeply about where they're living and who's living there. What are we not taking into account that people need?" Goldberg Haas added.

"We all belong here, we all contribute to the community and we can all make change and be part of the way our community is shaped and developed," Nova explained. "The LES Citizens Parade will give older adults — often an 'invisible' population — the opportunity to be heard in a loud visual and performance spectacle that allows for improvisational community collaboration."

The LES Citizens Parade is being performed on June 22 at 5:30 pm and June 24 at 4pm in Seward Park (Canal St and Essex St, Lower East Side, Manhattan); the procession begins at the park's entrance at East Broadway between Essex and Jefferson Streets, Lower East Side, Manhattan.