
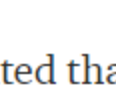


Open the Box: A Lower East Side Reset

 Alec Appelbaum Jun 28, 2018 · 9 min read



The neighborhood looked gray most of that Sunday, until the parade procession stepped up the gray ramp into the park, wearing Cookie-Monster-blue jumpsuits. All Sunday the mist and smell of the air hinted that it would in fact rain on the parade.

It didn't. Sun broke through over the center of the playground after the parade, and everyone else I saw through the rest of the day seemed to be facing toward each other, crinkling their eyes and lifting their heels to see dancers' faces.

This was the Lower East Side, a neighborhood that absorbed millions of poor immigrants, and this was the oldest playground in America. Did I mention that this was the **LES Citizens Parade**? It was. In operation it consisted of a stomp of marching band, senior citizens and kids in blue uniforms dancing with and alongside a lot of boxes. These were moving boxes, the cardboard jobbies you use to pack up your apartment- and in this event, they became moving in that other sense of the word.



On this sticky Sunday my wife, daughter and son and I left our high-rise and walked from the curved entrance downhill on East Broadway, half a block to the start. We saw, and joined, orderly rows of seven or eight seniors, mostly women, wearing custom-designed outfits with pant legs and collared shirts. "Those are all empty boxes!" a spiky-haired boy told another boy as they skeetered uphill past the mustering jumpsuit cloud. More on the boxes follows.

Oh- and there was my daughter's best pal, a girl I'd known for ten years since she was two, in her own bright-blue jumpsuit standing to the rear of the parade, with long curled hair and glasses, holding a boom mic.

I was here thanks to my neighbor [Laura Nova](#), an artist, who had worked with a team of choreographers to deliver a parade celebrating the neighborhood's stalwart Jewish, Latino and Chinese communities. From what I'd heard in conversation, the parade had to do with improvements to the waterfront nearby.

But experiencing it on this upland park made me feel closer to other neighbors' faces, more in tune with their gaits, more enmeshed in the gears of a place.

I spend a lot of time worrying about community in the abstract, because I write and teach about civics and business ethics. In the same go, I cherish the good luck of living in a dense, diverse area where I know neighbors' faces and habits and names. So it felt like a break to see Laura's art, starring another neighbor who's a musician.

At the end, though, it felt like a reset. Had art proved that it abides in an open-handed, musical manner? Had the marching band's oom-pa-pa-diddy and the moving boxes with quotes stamped on the side shaken some grit from our collective eyes? Had the parade woken up the Lower East Side?

It had reset my internal filter, at least for the afternoon. Making the errand rounds after the parade, I could swear I saw that people had subdued their screens and started looking at, laughing with each other. One guy and I chatted about baseball while crossing Grand Street. But it may be that people are always readier to chat than I give credit for- and that the parade had sharpened my radar for this readiness.

For the past 15 years I've lived in a high-rise uphill from this parade. I had almost daily grumbled to myself on the theme that people talk less to each other than they used to, how they prefer their shiny elongated rectangles in their hands. But maybe I just needed to be looking harder.

Maybe, this parade taught me, anyone you pass might become a dancer, or a drummer, or a photographer, or otherwise able to move you.



Laura, I knew, was a teacher as well as an artist. She had worked with senior citizens in workshops. She's also an athletic trainer, so when my daughter asked if the parade would involve lots of walking, I told her I didn't know. I thought it might involve jumping jacks.

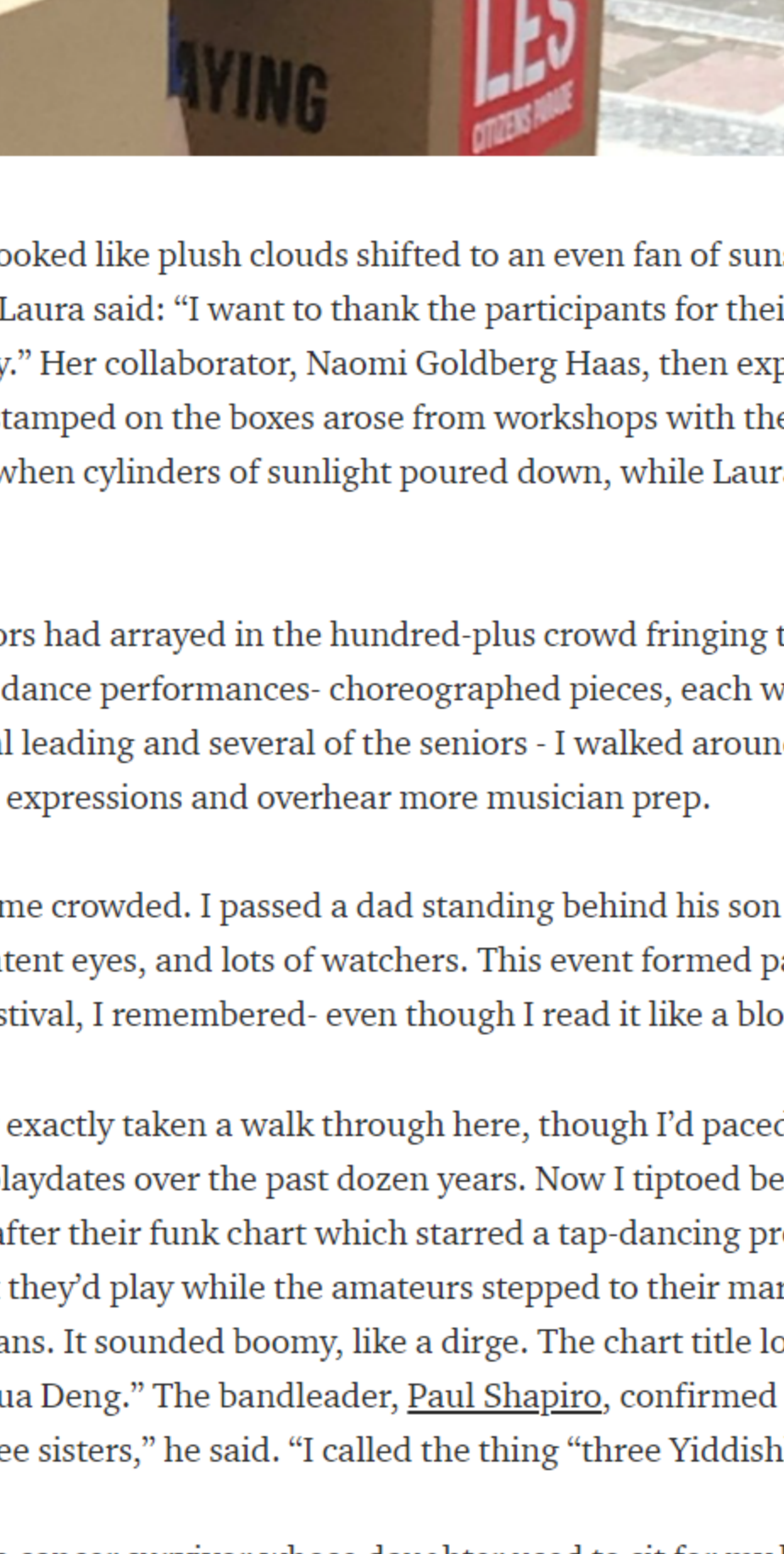
As it turned out, at the start, it involved taking in a lot of sights and sounds.



(Often I reset what my daughter's living by recalling an analogue to my own twelve-year-old year. No analogy arose for this. The marching band alone set that straight.)

In front, also in jumpsuits, six musicians played. Leading them: the guy who swaps pickups from Hebrew school with me on alternate weeks, blowing into a soprano sax that worked like a baton. What they played sounded like it was from Dixieland- thumping tuba, reaching trumpet, echoing bass drum, notes lifting and landing.

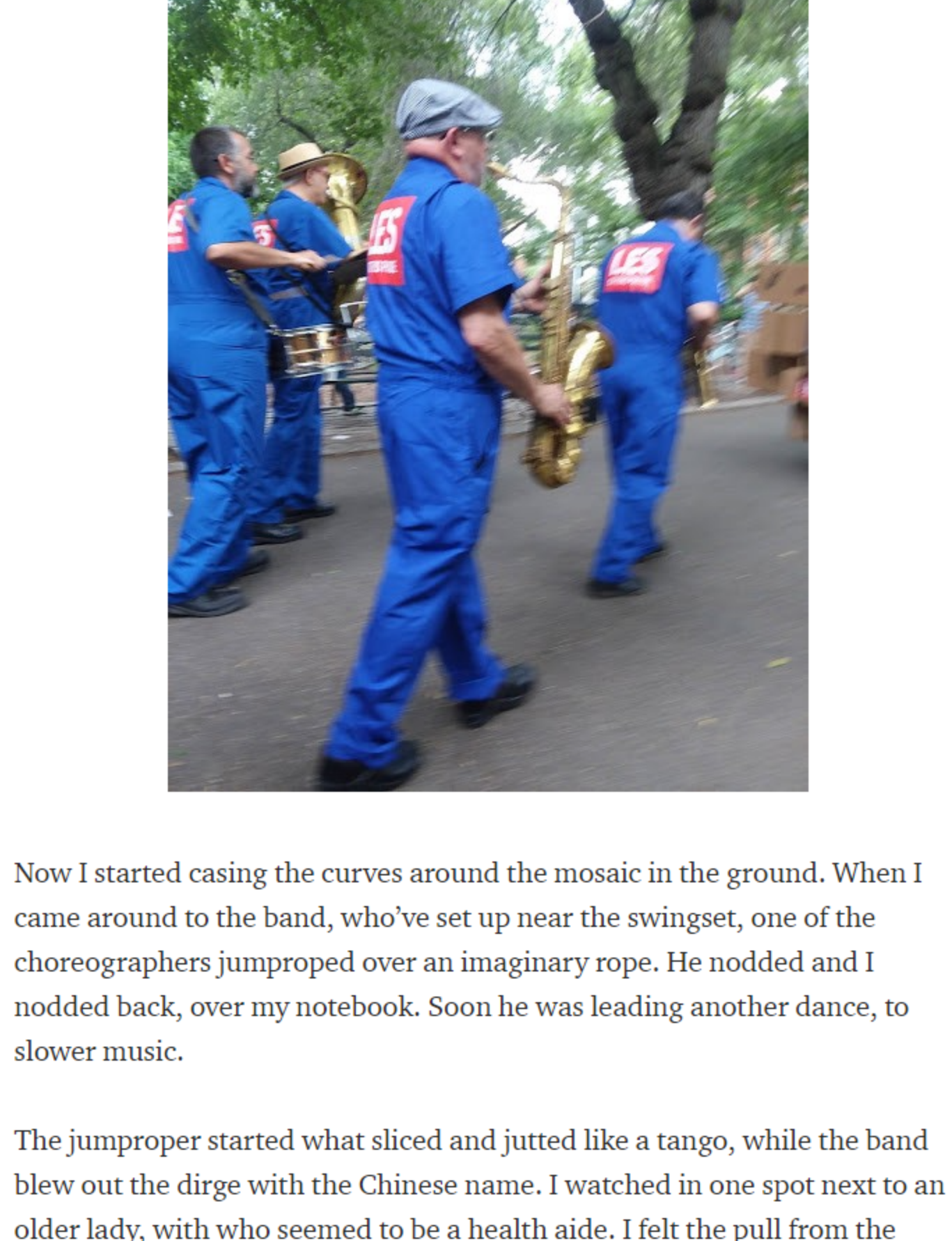
And the boxes! Anchoring the whole stream, cardboard boxes like you'd use in an apartment move rolled on dollies. They bore stamps on the sides: RESILIENCE, COOKIES, DETERMINATION, MOVING FORWARD, L'CHAIM, EARNING. Some dancers carried them. We followed the box brigade, my wife and son and daughter calling out words they read on the boxes.



The dancers progressed to the flat path bordering the playground equipment, moving at the same speed but with more accent in the hips. My wife noticed aloud the other neighbors from our bus stop, as they streamed in. Dancers stopped and rocked in place, shouting: Staying! Moving! Moving! Staying! And to me things had become moving.

A woman who looked about 10 years younger than I am, with curly brown hair and a whitish knit top, watched the paraders round the low fence to the park's central mosaic with her hand over her heart. We rounded the next corner, turning parallel with Essex Street where I buy cold-brews on weekend mornings. One of the marchers kept time tapping an umbrella on the concrete.

They proceeded in pace to the center.



What had looked like plush clouds to an even fan of sunshine on the ground, as Laura said: "I want to thank the participants for their honesty and bravery." Her collaborator, Naomi Goldberg Haas, then explained how the words stamped on the boxes arose from workshops with the seniors. And that's when cylinders of sunlight poured down, while Laura and Naomi spoke.

My neighbors had arrayed in the hundred-plus crowd fringing the mosaic. During the dance performances- choreographed pieces, each with a professional leading and several of the seniors- I walked around to catch more facial expressions and overhear more musician prep.

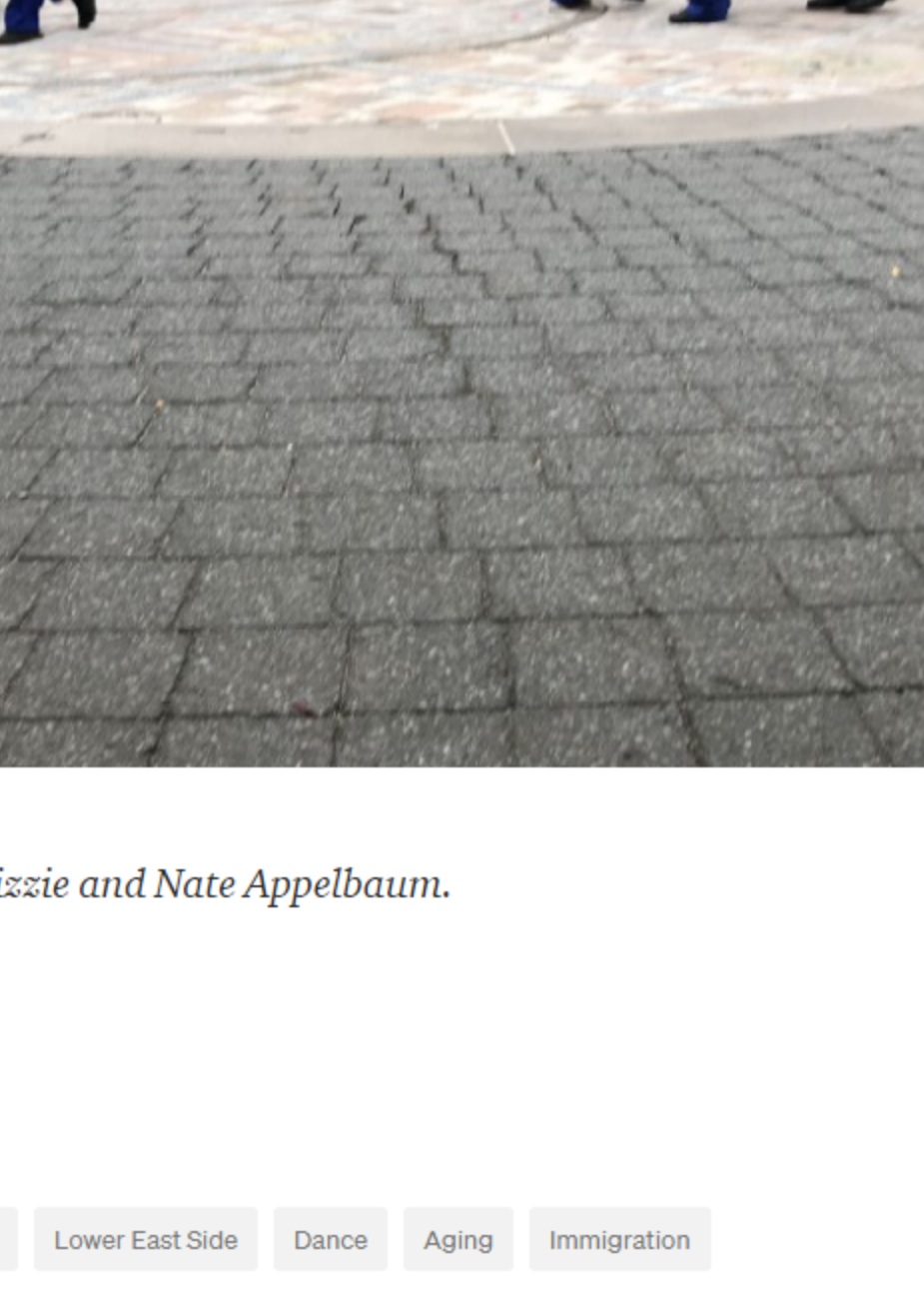
It had become crowded. I passed a dad standing behind his son and hugging him with intent eyes, and lots of watchers. This event formed part of a citywide festival, I remembered- even though I read it like a block party.

I had never exactly taken a walk through here, though I'd paced through dozens of playdates over the past dozen years. Now I tiptoed behind the musicians after their funk chart which started a tap-dancing professional, to see what they'd play while the amateurs stepped to their marks holding red paper fans. It sounded boomy, like a dirge. The chart title looked like "Yunnan Hua Deng." The bandleader, [Paul Shapiro](#), confirmed this later. "It means "three sisters," he said. "I called the thing "three Yiddishkeit sisters."

Now I saw a cancer survivor whose daughter used to sit for my kids smiling to my right, the previous dances with the boxes perhaps entering her memory too. My memory of her rolls out more strands than I'd have thought: seeing flyers in the laundry room for her one woman performance that ID'd her as a survivor; seeing her at a school I was visiting and not mustering nerve to say hello: talking politics with her husband in the building's gym very early one morning.

All these folks streamed on different times through the day. Sometimes my memory of them wobbled, sometimes I forgot when I'd first met someone, but today they seemed as rooted in the park as the London Plane trees.

The anchor had to be the boxes. One dancer in a choreographed piece balanced a few on his head. Seeing that metaphor made me smile a bit, thinking of the many times I tell others that I have a lot on my mind- as if they don't.



Now I started casing the curves around the mosaic in the ground. When I came around to the band, who've set up near the swingset, one of the choreographers jumped over an imaginary rope. He nodded and I nodded back, over my notebook. Soon he was leading another dance, to slower music.

The jump started what sliced and jutted like a tango, while the band blew the dirge with the Chinese name. I watched in one spot next to an older lady, with who seemed to be a health aide. I felt the pull from the page to my pen in the *harmony, diversity* vein. Yet I shorthanded no such abstractions- only what I saw. The older lady on her walker, with a white loose ponytail, greeting another older lady in Chinese.

Maybe in dense, old, vertical neighborhoods like this we can aspire with folks of all ages and ethnic heritages and beliefs- but, mortal and limited, we normally burrow. Maybe the gift we take from music and dance involves how these arts concentrate what can happen in neighborhoods: people with separate preoccupations and occupations coming together to make joyful ritual.

Last, the seniors and choreographers spread to the circle's rim. They joined hands and twisted from their hips. The music became more staccato, lingering in unresolved minor keys for more notes but less time. I was standing next to Naomi, Laura's partner. I thought I saw the dance I knew from bar mitzvahs, from my wedding, from Jewish rituals that predate my grandfather's arrival as an immigrant in 1909 three blocks from where we stood.

"Is this actually a hora?" I asked.

"It's a version," the choreographer said.

"Just beautiful," I said. "Congratulations."

After the dance party ended, kids and parents from our bus stop settled near a bench nearby. My neighbor — you remember, Paul Shapiro- shared some hugs. "Very Lower East Side," he said with a tuneful lift.

"When you do things like this, you find people in the neighborhood more easily," he went on. "You need to do something like this to bring people together and mix it up."

The notion of community may ever remain mixed up. We may always have rainy Sundays to endure.

Reasons for loving a neighborhood may always flit and fly. You might say: it's cute. It's got history. It's got haute. It's a real community. This word I apply like a poncho to routine acts- nodding hello to someone as I hold a door and then she holds the next door in the vestibule, let's say.

The grip of shared experience can feel loose, or fading. . .But music, dance and story lift the eye from the ground, to the neighbor and the neighborhood, and something may flow into brighter visibility from there.

Photos by [Lizzie](#) and [Nate Appelbaum](#).