

## A “Feel Good” Story: The Problem With Positive Narratives

By Sarah Delmonte

We all want to hear positive news. Everyone finds enjoyment in a story of peace and prosperity wrapped up in a pleasant bow. With the melancholic scrolling through social media and news outlets only to find more stories of natural disasters, trouble in politics, and rise in inflation, hearing about a good deed sparks hope for the future.

The Los Angeles Times made [an attempt at a positive story](#) with the introduction of the nonprofit organization Urban Alchemy. Founded by psychologist Lena Miller, Urban Alchemy began as a small organization with a \$35,000 grant to maintain public toilets. As of 2021, the company acquired \$51 million in revenue through city contracts.

Its business? Providing temporary housing for the homeless.

Homelessness in the United States has seen an overwhelming increase in the past few years. The National Alliance to End Homelessness reported that the number of unhoused people [increased by 6 percent](#) since 2017, with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [reporting 582,000 people](#) on the streets in 2022. With information such as that, it might be easy to think that Urban Alchemy is doing a good service to communities everywhere by setting up these tents.

Unfortunately, reality destroys that impression tenfold.

Urban Alchemy [accumulated six lawsuits](#) since its founding in 2018, one of which being [a sexual harassment lawsuit](#) and another correlated with labor violations. Furthermore, Miller declined to comment on her salary, [listed at \\$220,000](#) in city documents. Many homeless people within the organization’s “safe sleep villages” reported employees of Urban Alchemy for civil rights violations and abuse.

In December 2022, an Urban Alchemy employee named Joseph Perry [shot a man within one of the shelters](#), returning to work shortly after.

As more information is uncovered regarding this private organization, the impression it initially gives transforms into a disturbing image straight out of dystopian fiction.

Stories such as the one of Urban Alchemy are a pandemic. The narrative focuses on people struggling—be it homeless individuals on the streets or families having to take care of each other in times of financial crisis. The solution can then take many forms. A private company donates

money, an influencer films someone while providing them with a new house, or a “pay-it-forward” tactic banks on the kindness of people in a similar scenario. These “feel good” stories all adopt the same perspective: that humans help each other when we need it most.

When taken at a surface level, the stories seem perfectly valid and compassionate. A beautiful resolution manifests through the moral generosity of others, and the suffering individual can continue on without suffering as much. However, articles such as this one tend to brush the overall problem under the rug while caring more about a quick boost of serotonin.

In the case of homelessness in the U.S., Urban Alchemy is less of a positive alternative than it is a problematic distraction. Of course, the organization provides temporary housing, but it also assisted with the forced relocation of a [previously established homeless camp](#) in order to get the enrollment in the first place. Since Urban Alchemy is categorized as a nonprofit organization, it gives the false impression that their business is more humane. Unfortunately, the organization at best serves as a band-aid for a drastically growing problem.

The Los Angeles Times’ article is hardly the only one to try and twist a negative reality into artificial wholesomeness. News platforms and social media alike present tales of [teachers receiving](#) donated [work hours from coworkers](#), low-income employees [getting financial support](#) from internet users, and [children giving up their savings](#) to help parents pay rent. It is easy to take these articles at face value and commend the actions of those involved, but when do we stop and think about what drove us here in the first place? How did we reach a point where individuals in our developed world are begging for support from those around them?

We should be appalled by the systems around us creating these problems rather than celebrating one instance of someone overcoming them.

We should look at Urban Alchemy as it is—a business thriving on the struggle of others while masquerading as the solution. We need to start calling out these articles for placing a veil over the shortcomings of our society today. If we don’t treat these stories as warning signs and take drastic action to tackle the main issues, we are only accepting those problems as something inevitable.