

THE BEACON

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YOUR VISION, YOUR VOICE

NORTH MEMPHIS SPRING FEST

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The CRA welcomed spring with the North Memphis Spring Fest! Held in the parking lot of the old Chism Trail grocery store, the event brought together residents and friends from just about all of North Memphis' neighborhoods.

The CRA acquired the building and lot and has ever since leaped at every opportunity to activate the space for community use.

The fest featured live performances from local bands, dance/ballet ensembles and vocalists such as: Black Storm Drumline, Takeover Dance Krew, LeMoyne-Owen College Concert Choir, PRIZM Ensemble, Afrikan Jazz Ensemble, Memphis Jazz Workshop and New Ballet Ensemble. Attendees also enjoyed delicious cuisine from some of Memphis' favorite food trucks: TacoNagas, Let's Be Frank and Chillin' N the Shave Sno Cones. It was a true celebration of life, joy, warm weather and so much more to come for North Memphis.



CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

NORTH MEMPHIS SPRING FEST



“
Never underestimate the
power of a small group of
committed people to change
the world. In fact, it is the
only thing that ever has.”

-Margaret Mead



HEADED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

299 Chelsea Ave.

Before Restoration



After Restoration



The city of Memphis makes the list of “10 US Cities With the Most Churches”. It is often said that you can’t travel a mile in Memphis without passing a church. Turns out, it’s true!

While hundreds of churches have existed as pillars in communities, meeting the spiritual and physical needs of Memphians for centuries, numbers don’t always translate to impact. That’s no knock to the universal Church, but rather a reality of humanity. People and times change and if church, as an entity, doesn’t change with them, irrelevance is inevitable.

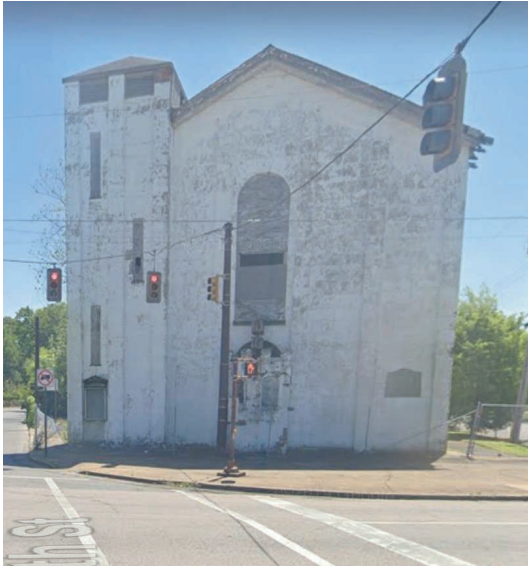
There is a special church in the Uptown TIF District, “The Brick Church” at the corner of Chelsea between 6th and 7th street. While the space is a community landmark, it has been vacant for 20+ years and hasn’t touted the reputation that most would hope for a church building. Neighbors referred to it as “an eye sore, filled with trash and clutter.”

When the CRA acquired the space, the inside was just as unsightly if not worse than the outside of the building. Vast portions of the ceiling were crumbling in, pews stacked against walls, weathered hymnals and Bibles scattered across the floors, and a quilt of dust accumulated over decades of emptiness. The space was in ruins. One could not look at it without

wondering, “What happened here?”

The church’s history dates back to 1860 when it was built as the first brick church in the city by Third Presbyterian Church. It was occupied by General Ulysses S. Grant’s Union troops during the Civil War. The upper half of the building was a hospital and the bottom was a stable for horses. In 1916 the church’s name was changed to Chelsea Avenue Presbyterian Church led by Reverend Fontaine deGradffenreid. It’s unclear how long this congregation remained in the church, but in 1981, it was purchased by the Centennial Baptist Church. Led by Rev. Dr. Jerry Jones, the church purchased the building despite the adversity brought on by a changing community.

Public documents from the church stated, “In the day and time, where inner city flight is prevalent, our congregation felt the need to stay in spite of vandalism to the church. We wanted to worship and grow this ‘old brick building’, because we are a church that believes in witnessing to all.” During this era, the building received its status as a Historical Landmark. The late Pastor Jones said “our prayers are that we can restore this building to its former beacon of hope, not only because of the past, but also for the future.”



With a small congregation and no outside funding source, Centennial eventually closed its doors at 299 Chelsea. Without people, a church is merely a building, vulnerable to the wide spreading impact of neglect and eventually, blight.

In 2020, the CRA acquired the building and now neighbors are saying, “its never looked better!”

On March 22, 1983, Pastor Jones stated in the Commercial Appeal, “It is said that Grant chose the building [to house federal troops] because of its strength,” and that statement still rings true today. Over the last two years, CRA engineers and construction crews have worked to restore the space’s natural beauty and despite 160 years of wear and tear, the building is in excellent condition!



June West, Chief Development Officer at Memphis Heritage said, “There is something magical about this place that needed to be revived. There are original pocket doors, arches and flooring made with lumber or bricks that we cannot find anymore. This building is telling us: “I’m going to stay”.

The CRA will soon announce the new tenant of 299 Chelsea and continue renovations. Meanwhile, we asked community members what a space like this should be and here’s what they had to say:



“I think it should be something for community use because it hits all areas of this neighborhood, it’s in the heart of North Memphis.” **Glen Lloyd TechFix, Bickford/ Bearwater**



“I really see this being something for children.” **James Snearley Pastor of Morning Star- New Chicago, Manassas High Alum**

“I can’t wait until people can see the inside. It looked hopeless, with no vision for new life. I’m glad its being restored instead of condemned. To knock it down would be to knock down a piece of Memphis.”

Roosevelt Bonds, West TN CDC Scutterfield/ Smokey City

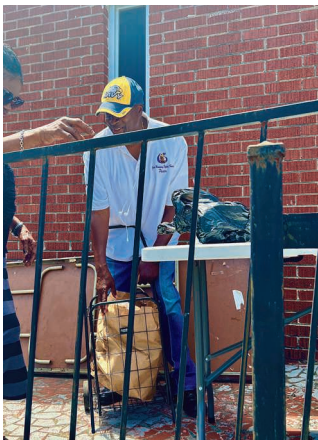
Man on Fire:

North Memphis Pastor leads the charge for a new fresh food distribution center intended for 1092 N. Manassas

The CRA recently met with pastors and religious leaders within the Uptown TIF District to strategize and develop collective goals addressing crime, safety, business development, homeownership and community pride. About 30 leaders had the opportunity to express their concerns around these issues. There was also a viewing of CRA's 3-part docuseries OWN at the meeting. The film displays several ways in which the CRA is working to remediate slum and blight.



In attendance was Pastor Ronnie King from Grace Missionary Baptist Church (GMBC) in New Chicago. GMBC and the CRA have recently entered a partnership that will bring a boost to their bi-monthly food distribution program.



As it stands, GMBC can only provide shelf stable products to residents. The partnership would convert 1092 North Manassas into a distribution hub for fresh produce and prepared meals for residents in 38107. Pastor King initially connected with the CRA through the Block Wellness program, receiving tree maintenance. It didn't take CRA staff Kimani Shotwell long to see that there was much more in store for the

two organizations, "The communities of the Uptown TIF have expressed the importance of helping them find solutions to food insecurity. Pastor King and GMBC's food program has existed since before the COVID outbreak and we hope that this partnership

will allow them to expand greatly on their efforts to provide the New Chicago community with fresh locally grown produce and meats," said Shotwell.



GMBC is also invested in providing affordable housing in the neighborhood and believes it to be an integral part of community restoration. King said, "I love that development is happening here, but I'm afraid that people will eventually get priced out of living here. I hope we can work with the CRA to keep housing reasonable."

One of the biggest sentiments from the pastors at the meeting was not only did churches need the CRA's assistance but also that the churches needed each other.

King ended by saying, "A church can't be so selfish to do the work of developing the whole person by themselves. CRA is important because we can't do this alone and neither can the CRA. I feel like New Chicago has been forgotten but now, because of the CRA, there is attention being given to the area. We have to restore the pride that was once here. We can only do that kind of big work with an organization like the CRA."

Be The Light: Kney Street Tranquility Park



The CRA seeks opportunities to highlight neighbors being a light to the North Memphis community as much as possible. This time around, we're putting the spotlight on several New Chicago residents that have been taken from this Earth but left their light for all of us.

Residents can expect to see several blighted, vacant lots erected into new Tranquility/ Sanctuary Lots in the coming months. Sanctuary lots are communal spaces, inviting neighbors to enjoy meditation, nature, play and one another. Think of a neighborhood park, but better, a space intentionally developed as a place of peace and safety. Many vacant lots are too small for a house or building, but leaving them abandoned attracts violence and unwanted activity. Sanctuary Lots are an extension of the Block Wellness program initiated by CRA Director of Community Building, Engagement and Impact, Kimani Shotwell. Block Wellness is the CRA's block by block approach to addressing infrastructure repairs, overgrowth, vacant lots and abandoned/ unused structures.

The CRA recently dedicated one of these lots, at the dead end of Kney in New Chicago, to deceased neighbors of note. Trees were named for neighbors and surviving family members joined us to commemorate the land and moment.

Larry Price (pictured R) represented his family who has owned Three Sisters Sundry for 100+ years on Kney Street. Price is working with other community agencies to develop the space



into a neighborhood asset and continue the family legacy. "You've gotta come back when we're open and get the best pulled shoulder in town" he shouted. When the sundry was open, this sandwich was their claim to fame. One day New Chicago residents will have the luxury of trying this sandwich for themselves and they can walk it off by stopping by the Kney Street Tranquility Park. Now Open!

Bring a book, a blanket and a friend and stop by for a tranquil afternoon one day!

NORTH MEMPHIS GREENLINE

Readers may recall us announcing that the North Memphis Greenline Project was underway last year. Today, it is well on the way to completion by Fall 2022. The project is a part of the CRA's Master Community Plan. The trail will link Uptown to Wolf River Greenway all the way to Shelby Farms Park in approximately 40-50 miles of continuous trail connectivity.

Kimley-Horn was given the contract and asked to design a way to connect the greenline. They are also largely responsible for community engagement, permitting processes, and making sure the design is implemented the way it was intended. This would prove to be a test of creativity for registered landscape architect and design planning engineer, Henry Minor. "We were asked to engage the neighborhood to make sure we provided amenities and recreational activities that they wanted."

In engaging the citizens, neighbors, and residents, developers found that while the greenline was appreciated, there was a large demand for flexible green space and a fitness center. As a result, one of the signature features is a 80ft by 200ft long green space. A fitness plaza with permanent built-in equipment for residents with an active lifestyle will also be included. The fitness plaza was designed for residents to get a total workout. This will in turn promote an active and healthy lifestyle that will promote fitness and boost the overall quality of life.

The structure will be constructed in front of the Grind City Brewery. "We were intentional to create easily accessible access points." Another priority was to make sure that the greenline will be safe, so a raised crosswalk at North Second Street and another at Waterworks was added to the plans. The tunnel will also have a good lighting system and murals that create an inviting experience, encouraging pedestrian usage.



The green space will be filled with natural trees and native plants. A portion of Washington Trail will be upgraded due to the new trail.

It will take a while to connect all of the trailways, but when they are completed, residents and visitors alike will be able to experience the city in a way they would not have been able to before now.

WE SALUTE YOU ROSALYN WILLIS!

After four years of service to North Memphis communities, Rosalyn Willis, President of the Community Redevelopment Agency, is stepping down. Willis was hired by the CRA Board and approved by both Mayor Strickland and Mayor Luttrell based on her 30+ years in construction, real estate development, community advocacy and preservation.

Willis has been adamant about using the allotted \$125 million of Uptown TIF funds towards the benefit of North Memphis residents. Specifically, Willis led the extension of the Uptown TIF to parts of North Memphis that desperately needed resources to address ongoing neglect. In 2018, New Chicago, Bickford, and Smokey City were added to the Uptown TIF District and a new Binghampton TIF was launched. Willis initiated an investment of more than \$7 million into 50 new homes and major renovations for 70+ owner occupied homes in the district, making affordable housing a reality for old and new neighbors alike.

In addition to efforts in advocating for residents to have safe, warm and dry spaces to call home, Willis and her team is investing over \$12 million in public improvements and neighborhood restoration. By addressing blighted properties, infrastructure repair, replacing more than five miles of sidewalk, cleaning up 250+ lots, and assisting 1,400+ residents with tree trimming/ tree removal services, Willis' intentionality to invest in people and neighborhoods is evident.

This is why North Memphis neighbors are sad to see her go. Valerie Peavy, Uptown TIF District resident and former owner of The Office @Uptown said, "Rosalyn led the effort to provide more community initiated improvements. She took the time to understand the concerns of the community and where she could, she addressed them. Some long abandoned blighted properties were purchased and razed making way for future development. Her focus on blight removal and infrastructure improvements is evident when you travel through parts of Uptown. She will definitely be missed."

When asked why she's stepping down, Willis replied, "I'd lie awake at night thinking about



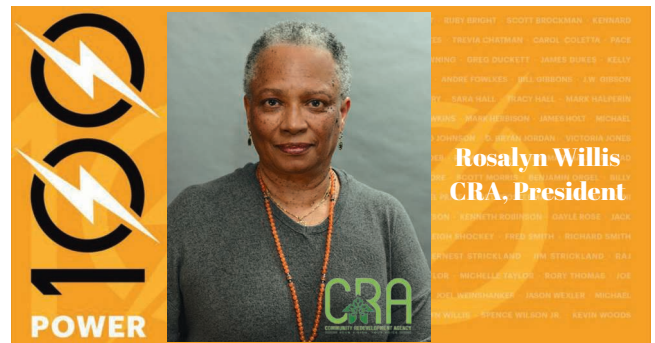
Memphians who don't have their basic needs met. Then I'd get up and work tirelessly with staff to resolve the problems. It's what I loved and still love doing, but it was also emotionally exhausting and I've been at it for a long time." Willis said she's looking forward to continuing the work of community development but in a much lighter capacity and not before she spends some much needed time with her family.

Willis recruited the CRA's first staff and consultants. Together, they have done transformational work with the intent of fueling the next generation of North

Memphians towards undeniable community pride. Willis commented, "I couldn't have done this work without the amazing CRA staff. They've worked diligently so that residents can look at the work we've done and say, someone cares about us. We want that care to give residents the boost they need to carry the torch for their own community."

The CRA Board will soon announce a successor for the role.

This all comes on the heels of Willis' recognition by the Memphis Business Journal as a Power 100. This list boasts the most influential business leaders in the city. The CRA is grateful to have had Willis' expertise at the helm of addressing blight in North



Memphis. Willis' genuine care for communities and the people who make them is the essential ingredient to the effectiveness and progress she's brought to the CRA over the last four years. We salute you Rosalyn Willis!