

The Death and Life of Chicago

By **BEN AUSTEN** – *New York Times* - May 29, 2013 [126 Comments](#)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/magazine/how-chicagos-housing-crisis-ignited-a-new-form-of-activism.html>

On a 100-degree day last summer, on Chicago’s southernmost edge, Willie Fleming, who goes by J. R. (“It stands for Just Righteousness”), crept up to an abandoned ranch house shrouded in overgrown weeds. The overwhelmingly poor and black neighborhood sits beside a 150-acre, 1,500-unit public-housing complex and is about as far — literally and figuratively — from the Loop as you can get and still be in Chicago. Nearly a quarter of the homes in the area had been empty for at least two years. Usually when J. R. scouts for properties to break into and take over, he looks for ones with unmown grass, a sign of vacancy and disregard. But this was excessive. “I don’t come back here without my air gun,” he said, backing away. A young couple next door had set up lawn chairs on the sidewalk. An infant in only a diaper tottered around them. “That’s the dead-dog cemetery,” the man announced, motioning to the ranch house.

Multimedia



[Slide Show](#)

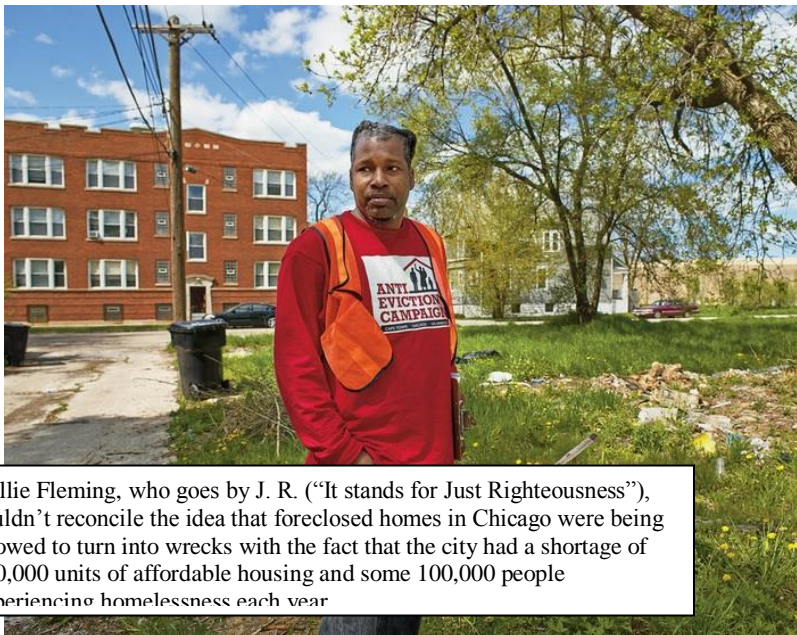
[Stuck in the Shadow of Affluence](#)

Readers’ Comments

- [Post a Comment »](#)

- [Read All Comments \(126\) »](#)

Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign:
Online @ <http://chicagoantieviction.org> &
[Facebook page](#)



Willie Fleming, who goes by J. R. (“It stands for Just Righteousness”), couldn’t reconcile the idea that foreclosed homes in Chicago were being allowed to turn into wrecks with the fact that the city had a shortage of 120,000 units of affordable housing and some 100,000 people experiencing homelessness each year

J. R. told the couple about the Anti-Eviction Campaign, the group he founded in 2009 with Toussaint Losier, a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Chicago and a fellow housing activist. At 40, J. R. possesses the softening bulk of a former running back — he was all-state as a high-school sophomore. A skunklike streak of white runs up the center of his ringleted black dreadlocks. In the past year, he said, the Anti-Eviction Campaign freed up 20 abandoned properties, fixing up the buildings and moving “home-less people into the people-less homes.”

As hard as the foreclosure crisis hit Chicago, its force has been felt with an unevenness that can seem fiendishly

unjust. The U.S. Postal Service, which tracks these numbers, reported that 62,000 properties in Chicago were vacant at the end of last year, with two-thirds of them clustered as if to form a sinkhole in just a few black neighborhoods on the South and West Sides. Currently about 40 percent of all homeowners in these communities owe more on their mortgages than their homes are worth, and countywide 80,000 foreclosures are wending their way through circuit court. Last spring, a nine-month study conducted by the National Fair Housing Alliance revealed what everyone in these neighborhoods already knew: After forcing out families in foreclosure, banks failed to properly market, maintain and secure the vacated homes. Thieves subsequently entered many of the properties and stripped them of copper and anything else that could be trafficked. J. R. couldn’t reconcile the idea that homes were being allowed to turn into wrecks with the fact that the city had a shortage of 120,000 units of affordable housing and some 100,000 people sleeping in shelters or on the street each year. Chicago didn’t have just a housing crisis, he offered, it had a moral crisis.

The Anti-Eviction Campaign always canvassed a neighborhood before acting, J. R. explained to the young parents. He asked if they would support a takeover of either of the empty houses that sandwiched theirs or of any of the abandoned homes on their block. A family that moved in, he said, most likely wouldn't pay rent or a mortgage, but wasn't that preferable to a vacant property further deteriorating, becoming a haven for gangbangers or drug users?

"Hell, yeah," the woman said, without hesitation, from her lawn chair.

"That's what we need, uh-huh, exactly," the man added.

Over the last few years, J. R. has been inside more than a hundred abandoned properties, each one a variation on the same theme of despair. He has stumbled upon drugs and whatever paraphernalia people needed to use or make them, along with the gathered sheets and worn-down mattresses of so-called trick houses. He has seen the carcasses of dogs and cats and rats and possums and raccoons. And yet J. R. proves surprisingly upbeat when talking about the efforts of the Anti-Eviction Campaign. At a Y.M.C.A. in Bronzeville, on the South Side, as people crowded into the basement for a screening of "Inside Job" — the 2010 documentary that essentially detailed the depressing back story of their own foreclosure plight — J. R. told them that he had seen the film 19 times and hoped to see it 150 more. It inspired him. "The government failed us. The market failed us. Harvard, Yale and the University of Chicago failed us. Our government — *the* government — doesn't belong to us. Forget them; they forgot us. We need to solve our problems ourselves."

It's not that the City of Chicago and its public and private partners don't care about the areas gutted by foreclosures; it's just that as investments, the numbers on these blocks simply don't add up, and no amount of good intentions is going to change that any time soon. Since 2009, the city has funneled \$168 million from the federal Neighborhood Stabilization Program into the purchase of 862 vacant foreclosures, fixing up 804 of them, at an average cost of \$110,000. It sank \$350,000 into the repairs of one home, but even at the asking price of \$105,000, no buyers could be found. So far only 91 of the units have sold. Although the real estate market has rebounded elsewhere in Chicago, with construction starts and prices both on the rise, many of the blocks surrounding these renovated homes are still studded with unsellable hulls. Of all the properties the city wanted to purchase under the program, it found it could get title on only about 10 percent of the buildings. To dodge fees, banks often weren't registering their foreclosures, or they didn't complete the foreclosure process to avoid the tax burden and responsibility of the unmovable real estate. Thousands of other bad mortgages were bundled in private securitization trusts, frequently with the trusts technically owning the loans and the evicted homeowners owning the property.

Cook County now plans to form what will become the nation's largest land bank, an entity that will acquire thousands of vacant residences, demolishing some, turning others into much-needed rentals and holding onto others until they can be released, strategically, back into the market. By clearing titles and back taxes, the land bank hopes to attract the most responsible of the investor groups that are currently gobbling up distressed housing in neighborhoods with far better prospects. The best of these firms use sophisticated algorithms to determine when to purchase a property, factoring in, among many things, the surrounding vacancy rates, the prevalence of crime and the quality of the schools. In the Chicago neighborhoods inundated with foreclosures, the homes don't come anywhere close to meeting the minimum threshold for the investors to buy.

"We're not like Detroit, cordoning off sections of the city," Benet Haller, Chicago's principal adviser for planning and design, told me. "But we are like London or Jakarta, with a hyperdense core — a zone of affluence — and something else beyond." What the housing crisis has revealed, in stark relief, is a Chicago that already looks increasingly like this vision of a ring city, with the moneyed elite residing within the glow of that jewel-like core and the largely ethnic poor and working-class relegated to the peripheries, the *banlieues*.

In the decades after World War II, as factories and mills closed and the economy that shaped the whole sprawling city until then collapsed, the "inner city" of Chicago became the place you fled, at least if you were white and had money. Between 1950 and 1990, the population of Chicago declined by 837,000 people. But in the past two decades, the city began to add residents again. No longer hog butcher or toolmaker, Chicago emerged from its long decline as a self-proclaimed "global city" — a tourist destination for the world, a player with derivatives and trade shows, a city of big transportation hubs. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of residents in the city's central area increased by 48,000 (more than any other city center in the country), and even with tens of thousands of new condos added there before the housing crash, vacancy rates for high-end apartments currently stand near a 10-year low. Richard M. Daley, who during his 22 years as mayor did much to foster the downtown renaissance, even moved from Bridgeport, the family's old sod on the South Side, to a new upscale development overlooking Millennium Park, which he built. The current mayor, Rahm Emanuel, has already induced 15 corporations to relocate their

headquarters to Chicago. “The city is no longer a place to get on a plane and go to the coasts,” Emanuel said in May, “but a place to stay and call home.”

None of this is revelatory. It’s a thumbnail history that any Chicagoan could tell you, and it’s similar to the trajectory of any number of American cities. The conundrum that exists in Chicago, though, is what happens to the “something else beyond” now that the center is prospering. For the people trying to make their lives in the areas that J. R. and his fellow activists are trying to save, the question is not at all a theoretical one. The way many of them see it, they’re being sacrificed so that the city can be reborn.

In these outlying communities, as well, the residents with the means to leave often have, compounding the problems of concentrated poverty. From 2000 to 2010, while affluent whites were migrating back to downtown, Chicago’s African-American population fell by 181,000, an astounding 17 percent drop. Many of them decamped for the south and west suburbs as well as the relative safety and higher living standards of the actual South. The foreclosure crisis then blew through and removed a lot of the remaining homeowners and wealth. It was hard for people on the South Side and the West Side not to see evidence of an engineered shrinkage, a strategy to starve derelict communities of resources, thus bringing about their further depopulation and return to nature. Over the past decade and half, Chicago razed all 82 of its troubled housing project high-rises, the biggest civic redesign since urban renewal placed the massive tower-and-garden developments there in the first place. The towers had become warehouses for the most disadvantaged, symbols of urban decay and the failures of government to reverse this slide. Getting rid of the projects meant that areas near the expanding zone of affluence were cleared of blight. They were also cleared of many of their former inhabitants.

Chicago no longer has the money for big urban renewal projects. Earlier this year, Emanuel did announce an initiative that will couple public and private investment to try to revive several communities that possess — or are at least on the edge of — some existing economic development. In Pullman, on the far South Side, for instance, a Walmart is expected to anchor a 180-acre mixed-use facility. The mayor described how these pockets of activity could become larger, link up and eventually form corridors that lead from, say, the South Loop, through Bronzeville and Hyde Park. But most city plans appear to be focused on land use and stabilization, not development. The city is escalating a program that allowed homeowners to acquire adjoining vacant lots, leaving them with expansive grassy estates. It is promoting urban agriculture and looking to turn empty rail lines and other industrial sites into recreation trails and natural drainage systems. At the same time, the city spent \$14 million last year to knock down 736 vacant buildings, including 270 abandoned homes that the Police Department identified as shelters for gangs and other criminal activity.

And then there’s Emanuel’s plan to close 50 schools, almost all of them in the same black and Latino neighborhoods battered by the foreclosures and a recent spike in homicides. The closures weren’t a matter of downsizing, Emanuel has said in the face of intense protests and criticism, but of trading up academically; he has pledged \$155 million for upgrades at the “welcoming schools.” Others were worried more about the long-term consequences of these actions. “It’s a slow death once you take the schools out of these communities,” Brad Hunt, an urban historian and co-author of the recent book “Planning Chicago,” told me. “No one is talking shrinkage, even though that’s what we’re doing. In Chicago, that’s not the image we have of our city.”

Before turning to activism full time, J. R. still shared a name with his father, everyone calling him Junior. It seemed too small to him. He said his father was a C.I.A. operative, as well as a gunrunner and drug kingpin at the Cabrini-Green housing complex. His mother, Marlene McIntosh, was a former Black Panther and community organizer who moved the family around a lot. J. R. stayed on the South Side, in the Robert Taylor Homes — once the world’s largest housing project before the city tore it down — and at Cabrini-Green, the Hilliard Homes, the Henry Horner Homes, an apartment on the West Side, another place out in Waukegan and also in the south suburb of Dolton, just outside the Chicago city limits. He left the suburbs before his senior year of high school, moving in with a sister back at Cabrini-Green.

He had his first child there that summer. (The first of 10, a number that city officials, I’ve found, like to mention with a derisive raising of an eyebrow.) Cabrini-Green was then a 23-tower, 3,600-unit island of black abject poverty amid a steadily encroaching sea of white affluence. Located just blocks from the ritzy Gold Coast, the North Side development offered an unusual mix of isolation and access, and many residents were deeply attached to their home, tragic as it was. The towers clutched around J. R.’s high-rise were each controlled by a different gang, and the blacktop between them was known as the killing fields. On days when rumors spread of a retaliatory sniping, mothers would rush to the schools to collect their children, the teachers left standing before emptied classrooms. But J. R. could also point to the field where he played softball and the path along the river where he walked with girlfriends. He had family in nearly every building of the 70-acre project. Cabrini was his home, his identity, and tearing it down felt like taking an eraser to his past.

J. R. racked up arrests for selling drugs and for fighting with the police. He assaulted an assistant principal at his high school, but he said that was to escape a worse fate from the posse of Spanish Cobras waiting for him outside. When he was 19 years old, he started working for the ward's Young Democrats, a group led in part by Jesse White, a longtime gym teacher at a Cabrini elementary school who went on to become a state representative and is now the Illinois secretary of state. J. R. also operated a recording studio out of a vacant unit in his high-rise, bringing together musicians from the different gangs to record a kind of "We Are the World" of public housing. He still remembered a few lyrics to one song: *It's such a shame, we living in vain./They took our neighborhood, they don't want us to change./This where my mother grew up. This where my family grew up./Thank the Lord, he sent us to save the Greens through us.*

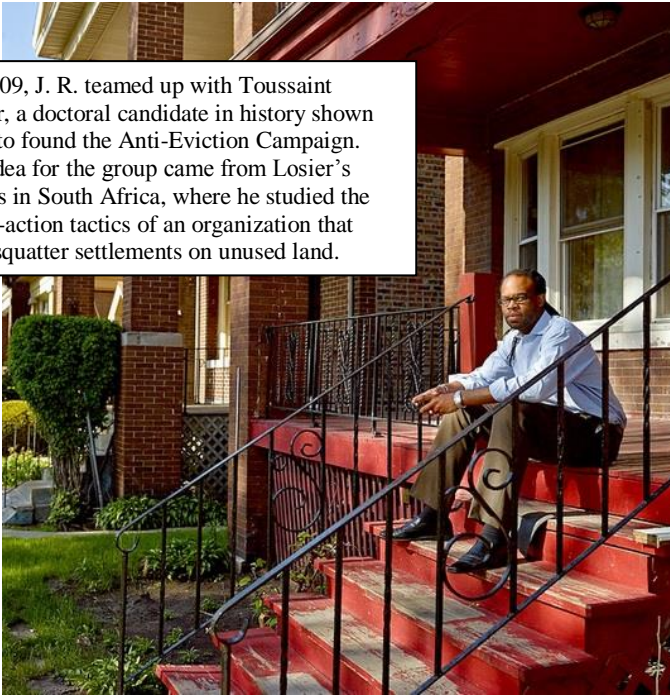
Another Cabrini resident, a man named Joe Peery, helped J. R. land his first job, at U.P.S. Peery was also one of the people running the Chicago-Gary chapter of the National Union of the Homeless. The organization was started in Philadelphia in 1983, when homelessness was shifting from addicts on skid row to displaced families everywhere, and grew to 20 branches nationwide and a membership of 15,000 people. Whereas President Franklin Roosevelt had responded to a similarly dire housing crisis by creating the National Housing Agency, Ronald Reagan reacted by slashing the social safety net, telling stories of a Chicago "welfare queen" who drove a Cadillac and ripped off the government for upward of \$150,000. The National Union of the Homeless, with the slogan "You only get what you are organized to take," pressured cities to create shelters and to give homeless people access to public showers and the right to vote. Peery remembered a homeless man freezing to death in a cardboard box just 100 feet from one of the Cabrini towers — a building filled with vacant units, central heat pumping ceaselessly into each of them. On May 1, 1990, the homeless union began an eight-city coordinated takeover of vacant government-owned housing, a prototype for the takeovers of bank-owned homes today. J. R. said of going off to work with Peery: "He'd talk to all us young guys about our inalienable rights. We'd say: 'That sounds communist, Joe. That's socialist, Joe.' But it was the truth. We started listening to Joe. 'Mr. Parker was homeless, and now he got a place to stay. Who did that? Joe and them? Wow.' We saw what was possible."

As much as the rights of property owners are sacrosanct in this country, certain gray areas exist in the law that may offer the radical urban homesteader some protection from prosecution. Adverse possession, a doctrine dating back centuries, was created in part to defend residents from distant heirs who might show up with ancient claims on land. If someone occupies an unused property continuously and openly for a set period of time and then begins paying the taxes, he or she becomes its rightful owner. So-called squatter's rights are based on this principle, but actual possession through the process remains incredibly difficult. In Illinois, a squatter must reside in the property without interruption for 20 years. Edward Voci, a lawyer who met J. R. while representing Cabrini-Green residents facing unlawful evictions, now works with Occupy Our Homes, a group affiliated with the Anti-Eviction Campaign. Voci's legal justification for the home takeovers comes not from adverse possession but from an exception in the Illinois trespass statute that exempts someone from prosecution if he or she enters an abandoned and unoccupied property and "beautifies" it. Voci admitted that his reading of the trespass law had never been tested in appellate court. But he said, "Putting a family in an abandoned building, ridding an area of blight, if that's not beautifying, I don't know what it is."

J. R. liked to proclaim that he didn't concern himself with the law, because he had human rights to back him up. "We're challenging amoral laws by breaking them." In 2009, he gave a tour of Cabrini-Green to an investigator from the United Nations tasked with examining the plight of housing in the United States. Since the mid-'90s, when cities across the country began systematically tearing down their high-rise housing projects, more than 150,000 units of public housing have been lost. Dislocated tenants were generally given Section 8 rent vouchers to find lodging on their own in the private market. But hundreds of thousands of low-end rentals were lost to the foreclosure crisis — a full 40 percent of all families who have been displaced from their homes were not owners but renters. When the U.N. issued its report detailing the lack of affordable housing in the country, J. R. experienced a surge of triumph. For a brief while, he believed that the international censure would oblige his government to house its citizens. He even kept an eye out for the arrival of the men in blue helmets.

The high-rises at Cabrini-Green were the last in the city to fall, the final one coming down in March 2011. J. R. was one of the few young men living there to join the citywide Coalition to Protect Public Housing. He felt he was part of the long tradition of community organizing and activism in Chicago. His mentors had marched for civil rights, led the voter-registration drives that propelled Harold Washington, Chicago's first black mayor, into office. Barack Obama had walked the very same blocks as J. R., fighting for the rights of public-housing tenants and for better job training for those laid off from the steel mills.

In 2009, J. R. teamed up with Toussaint Losier, a doctoral candidate in history shown here, to found the Anti-Eviction Campaign. The idea for the group came from Losier's travels in South Africa, where he studied the direct-action tactics of an organization that built squatter settlements on unused land.



But so much of the struggle today revolves around merely trying to hold on to quickly diminishing resources — staving off the shuttering of a relatively lousy school or a cluster of low-rise public housing or a health clinic. A great deal of the daily work of the Anti-Eviction Campaign focuses on keeping people from being forced out of their homes in the first place. Members stand in front of houses to physically blockade evictions. J. R. regularly accompanies them to court, and a lawyer provides free legal assistance at weekly meetings. As J. R. and his fellow activists see it, the beautiful thing about the home takeovers is that they capitalize on the isolation and abandonment of these neighborhoods and create their own self-contained, do-it-yourself empowerment zones — at once providing housing, work, job training and the beginnings of redevelopment.

The idea for the Anti-Eviction Campaign actually came from South Africa. Toussaint Losier had traveled there to study the direct-action tactics of an organization called the Western Cape Anti-

Eviction Campaign. Its members had been putting their bodies in front of homes to block evictions, building their own squatter settlements on unused land. So J. R. and Toussaint (who got to know each other when the chairman of the South African group visited Cabrini-Green) started a Chicago chapter together. J. R. realized they didn't need to build lean-tos in Chicago's black community. They had all the empty homes they required. "We want to do what Roosevelt did," he said of the home takeovers. "If the government won't provide public housing for the people, the people must provide it for themselves."

Rahm Emanuel spent his formative years outside Chicago, in the wealthy North Shore suburb of Wilmette, where his parents — as has now been mythologized — trained him and his brothers to spar verbally and come at life aggressively. He worked as the chief fund-raiser for Richard Daley's first successful mayoral bid, in 1989, and when he returned to Chicago a decade later, with the Clinton White House behind him, it was for a job at a major investment-banking firm. He took home \$18 million in just two and half years at the firm, while fortifying his ties to the city's business elite. He spent \$450,000 of his own money to run for Congress, eventually representing the same North Side community where his father first lived after immigrating from Israel. To run for mayor, he had to prove in court that he really was a Chicagoan.

I thought a great deal about this back story during the day I spent with the mayor this spring. Did he really understand the neighborhoods overrun by foreclosures and homicides? Did he have anyone from these areas advising him? How could he think school closures would be greeted there by anything but desperation and bitterness? The day actually began in the South Side neighborhood of Englewood, at Lindblom Math and Science Academy, where Emanuel presented a science teacher with a Golden Apple Award. In the school's immediate vicinity, there were dozens of boarded-up homes, many painted with red X's to let firefighters know that the buildings were free of squatters and need not be entered if burning.

From the back seat of his S.U.V., the mayor assured me that he saw it all — the empty properties and the vacant lots and the teenagers who were just now moseying over to class well after the first bell. But he also pointed out some of the 30 roads in Englewood his administration was repaving, the adults who created safe-passage routes for students traveling to and from Lindblom. There was indeed a renaissance in Chicago, the mayor declared, but the idea that there was some great gulf between downtown and the neighborhoods suggested a "false dichotomy," a premise that needed to be "scrubbed." His administration was investing millions in an Englewood community college that trained students for culinary and hospitality jobs. He was refurbishing a hundred train stations, rebuilding miles of track. By the time he was done, he said, 300 of the city's playgrounds would be overhauled. The previous night, the first balmy one of this year, 20 people were shot around the city. But in the first four months of 2013, there were 67 fewer homicides in Chicago than over the same period in 2012, a 42 percent decline.

The mayor was both oblivious to me and hyperaware of the outside press and whatever unfair critique of his city he felt that represented. Without a hello or a goodbye, he would begin and end our face-to-face sessions. Several times he pushed me in front of those flocked around him, announcing, "This guy has never been west of the Hudson." In

fact, I attended public schools on Chicago's South Side, and my family still lives there, with several of the previous night's shootings taking place not far from where I slept at my parents' home. I told the mayor about my Chicago credentials — in a phone interview the week before and repeatedly over the course of the day. “Yeah, with a 917 cellphone,” he harrumphed.

In the afternoon, Emanuel headed back to the South Side, to Bronzeville, where he sang “Lift Every Voice and Sing” in the DuSable High School auditorium. Alderman Pat Dowell, who represented the historic African-American neighborhood and led the singing, told me that the economy there had already shown signs of revival and that she was pleased with the mayor's increased investment in her community. Emanuel said he was using Bronzeville's rich cultural past as an economic-development tool. They had moved Gospel Fest from downtown to the neighborhood. They had granted DuSable historical landmark status.

I definitely saw Rahm Emanuel the highly skilled technocrat and business insider in action, but I was surprised by how much he seemed to enjoy the retail politics away from the city center and by how good he was at it. At Lindblom, I overheard an official from the Golden Apple Foundation say with delight that Emanuel visited every school in Chicago and that they couldn't get Daley to do any of this. At DuSable, the mayor entered a raucous cafeteria, handed his jacket to an aide and slipped onto the benches between the students with their chocolate milks and sad slivers of pizza. He squeezed hands, posed for photos, stood arms akimbo, shoulders back, hips forward, as he spoke to the young South Siders about their lives.

“This is the best job I've ever had in public life,” the mayor told me when we were back at his City Hall office at the end of the day. “I'm for Hillary Clinton or Joe Biden, whoever wants to run in 2016. I'm not going back. How many ways can I say it — no, *nyet, lo.*” He was home, and he loved everything about what he characterized as the most American of American cities — Chicago's people and energy and the consequences of his decisions there. “We have challenges in Chicago,” he said. “We can't wish them away.” But every neighborhood had strengths, he explained, and he would take those strengths and make them work for the people of Englewood and elsewhere. “Every challenge offers an opportunity.”

The Anti-Eviction Campaign was also focused on transforming challenges into opportunities. The first house the group broke into and restored was just a couple of miles from Lindblom, on the 6700 block of South Prairie Avenue, a stretch with four empty homes, wedged into the crease formed by the crossing of the Chicago Skyway and the Dan Ryan Expressway. In the summer of 2011, a friend told J. R. about a redbrick Victorian there. Deutsche Bank foreclosed on it two years earlier, and the house's owner, tired of trying to reach a renegotiated settlement, just walked away, eventually relocating to Philadelphia. But the foreclosure ended up among 1,700 temporarily halted in Chicago when the lawyers for the bank admitted to altering documents. Martha Biggs, who is 36 and serves on the Anti-Eviction Campaign's advisory board, told J. R.: “This is it. This is where we can make our statement about the human right to housing.”

Biggs's interest in the Prairie Avenue house was also personal, because she hoped to live there with her four children. When she was in her 20s, Biggs was evicted from Cabrini-Green for drug possession. Like many residents kicked out of Chicago public housing back then, she simply moved herself into one of the thousands of units the housing authority failed to refill after they became vacant. When the towers were torn down, she relocated with her children to an apartment on the West Side. But that building went into foreclosure, and she was compelled to move again. She and her children, then between the ages of 1 and 12, ended up sleeping on other people's couches when they could; more often, they huddled for the night in a parked minivan.

Powerfully built, with rosy biceps, Biggs drywalled and tiled and replaced pipes in the house on Prairie. Six weeks after the start of renovations, the Anti-Eviction Campaign held a news conference on the front lawn to announce the takeover. J. R. and Biggs both spoke into a bank of microphones set up by news affiliates, Biggs relating how her children no longer had to worry where they would wash up or get their socks cleaned. Tavis Smiley, on his national television show, covered J. R. and Biggs in an installment of his “Poverty Tour.” The New York Times ran an article about the home takeover: “[Foreclosed Home Is a Risky Move for Homeless Family.](#)”

But Biggs didn't think the move too risky. She lived on the first floor with her children and a family friend. (J. R. sometimes slept on the second floor.) Neighbors lent her rakes and donated chairs and a china cabinet. She, in turn, used her handyman skills to do a few small side jobs for them. Just as lenders and downtown officials had revised their economic understanding of property in these neighborhoods, so, too, had the people who stuck it out there. A productive squatter had come to look less like a criminal or a freeloader than a potential boon to a fading community. Biggs didn't worry too much about the sheriff or someone from the bank showing up to evict her. She kept receipts, and at the very least she would be compensated for her improvements to the house. She estimated

\$9,000 so far in parts and labor. And there were so many other vacant properties out there. As at Cabrini, she could just open up another and start over. "I've been through so much, really I feel like I can live anywhere," she mused. "As for property, I came from nothing, I can leave with nothing. They say, 'Who are you?' I say, 'Martha Biggs.' They say, 'What's your address?' I say, 'Earth.' "

J. R. estimates that the Anti-Eviction Campaign and its affiliated groups will be able to liberate a hundred foreclosed and abandoned homes in Chicago in the next year, maybe far more. He was training several other advocacy groups how to identify and occupy vacant properties. The houses they'd already taken were ideal workshops to teach basic carpentry and repairs. Money was always an obstacle, but they've been able to cobble together gifts from like-minded nonprofits. J. R. has also teamed up with a businessman — a man who used to have the contract to board up public-housing units — whose community-development corporation has an agreement to obtain houses donated by Citibank. J. R. said the banks were starting to take notice. The campaign needed only to keep on the attack. The Chicago City Council even seemed poised to pass an ordinance that would require banks foreclosing on properties to pay any renters living there \$12,000 in relocation fees or allow them to stay put, with rent-controlled leases, until the buildings were finally sold. Cathy Albisa, the executive director of the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, has worked with J. R. for years. "He is a man of faith," she says. "J. R. is a believer. He will do this work irrespective of the conditions."

For the Anti-Eviction Campaign to grow into a truly effective citywide phenomenon, however, it required that people in the neighborhoods take charge of their own communities. That was no easy task. One house they recently reclaimed was a bulky Dutch colonial that dominates a corner in an isolated residential section of South Chicago called the Bush. The area used to be a feeder for a nearby U.S. Steel mill, now shuttered, and some 1,700 homes there are vacant. One evening last summer, J. R. and a group of local activists calling themselves South Chicago Rising held a barbecue in the Bush. Burgers and corn on the cob cooked on a small grill set up on a bulldozed city block that had gone to field, the grass trimmed and parched to an amber hue. Smoke coiled around the 25 people sitting in a ring of foldout chairs. A group of them, all black and ranging in age from 30 to 60, had walked over from a halfway house. "Be good," the man monitoring them would utter forbiddingly when one of them seemed to get a little riled up. Mexican women from the block, some who didn't speak English, also filled out the circle, as did a few white activists who knew J. R. from other ventures. They passed around two-liter bottles of RC Cola and Squirt, listening to the rhythmic school-bell chiming of passing commuter trains and to the radio from a parked Hyundai.

Most of the assembled locals had never heard of the Anti-Eviction Campaign. They had shown up to eat free food and to express their contempt for an incredible development plan called Lakeside that promised to rebuild the old U.S. Steel site. This "new downtown for the South Side," according to the plan's architects, would ultimately contain more than 13,000 new homes, 17.5 million square feet of retail and commercial space and a 1,500-slip marina. Nothing had actually been built, but developers were nevertheless talking up the location's prospects as a vital tech and research center, as a possible future home of the Barack Obama Presidential Library.

Although a realized Lakeside promised jobs, the locals believed that any plan that enriched others had to be bad for them. A woman at the barbecue with purple hair extensions and a sweatshirt that declared her "Short but sweet," said she lived in the neighborhood 22 years and didn't want to see it disappear. A man named Al who had pushed a shopping cart to the gathering said he just wanted a place where he could continue to be homeless. "They'll get rid of us," he lamented.

A leader of South Chicago Rising, Crystal Vance Guerra, alternating between English and Spanish, tried to steer their concerns toward the house across the street. "How do we begin to organize to make sure Lakeside doesn't kick us out?" she asked rhetorically. "By taking back foreclosed homes." That was J. R.'s cue. "The bank won't help you, right?" he began, in a rhythmic call and response. "The people are left to do it for themselves, right? We throw our own community cookouts, right?" He pointed across the street. On the chain-link fence surrounding the reclaimed wood-frame house, someone had hung a bedsheet with a hand-painted message: "Everything belongs to everyone." J. R. explained that they cleaned up the house, taking it away from the drug dealers and the prostitutes. "That's where you all come in," he continued. The house now belonged to the community. It could become a neighborhood center. Homeless families could take up residence there. J. R. wanted to know whether those gathered would come out to defend the property when the call went out. Would they help rehab and maintain it? "I see a lot of great leaders out there," J. R. professed. "The community will have a sense of power. Your children will know that you did it."

The food eaten, the sun reduced to a smudge of phosphorescence on the horizon, the residents of the halfway home stood to leave, prompted by their minder. But two of them shouted over their shoulders that they would cook and wash. Most of the others concurred, saying they'd definitely come when called.

One of Mayor Emanuel's stops on the day I shadowed him was at the offices of 1871, a 50,000-square-foot center for digital start-ups named for the rebuilding of the city that occurred after the Great Chicago Fire. The tech hub was celebrating its successful first year of operation, and the mayor said it had created “a center of gravity for the new economy of the City of Chicago.” The entire surrounding neighborhood was flourishing. Formerly full of warehouses and prostitutes, and abutting the old Cabrini-Green, River North had become the home to Groupon, Google’s Chicago operations and hundreds of other digital start-ups — 7,500 tech-industry jobs in total. New gleaming towers had sprung up, some offering boat access to the Chicago River, and developers were swiftly adding 2,400 new luxury apartments. The mayor announced that he planned to create another commercial hub — for the life-sciences and biotech industries — somewhere nearby in the city center. This summer, he told me, he was opening two Jeanne Gang-designed boathouses, converting a river once used to haul coal and slag into a recreation center for kayaking and sculling and live music.

“My real goal is that the kids out of Lindblom can see themselves at a place like 1871,” the mayor explained. “Regardless of where they live in the city, I want children in Chicago to see downtown, the central business district, and envision themselves as part of this dynamic city — the city of energy and opportunity, the city that’s on the move.”

To get them there, he said, he needed to continue to invest in the city’s rivers and parks and neighborhoods, its infrastructure and schools. That way he’d attract more residents and businesses to Chicago, and with them would come additional revenue and jobs. He pointed out that another community college on the South Side was already preparing students for open positions in transportation and logistics. “If you have the best trained workforce, that’s the best insurance policy you can buy for the future of your city.”

It was such a perfect spring day in Chicago, with temperatures in the 80s, the sunlight dappling the boat-filled lake and crowds happily lunching in the downtown piazzas, the banners advertising museum and theater shows rippling from every light post. You could almost forget that other parts of the city looked like junkyards, with discarded and broken properties strewn about. You could almost believe that the city’s core would be able to radiate out energy like a star and revivify those satellites so far away in space and time.

In the meantime, J. R. and others would keep on trying to piece together a people’s public housing. On a Wednesday last fall, J. R. broke into a house on Prairie Avenue, directly across from the one where Martha Biggs lives. He slid open a window off the front porch of the orange-bricked two-flat, then unable to unstick the front door, kicked it open from the inside. Other members of the Anti-Eviction Campaign were smoking cigarettes outside. Thomas Turner wore a bike helmet, because at 6 foot 4, he regularly smacks into low-hanging pipes or ceilings during these maneuvers. He pulled a drill from a black duffel bag and began replacing the lock on the front door. Biggs got started securing the rest of the house, screwing shut the heavy wood windows on the first floor. Filling every silence, J. R. belted out an off-key “If I Had a Hammer.”

J. R. documented the state in which they found the 100-year-old house. He snapped before photos of a gaping hole in the ceiling, the kitchen stripped bare of its appliances and cabinetry, a bathroom scavenged of everything but a seatless toilet, the plaster and studs blasted to pieces. Windows were shattered or missing altogether. The flotsam and jetsam from capsized lives blanketed the floors — old winter coats and pants, soiled grocery store bags, a crusted gallon jug of Open Pit barbecue sauce. In the corner of the dining room was a water-stained “My First Birthday” photograph of a boy in an adult-size Chicago Bears jersey and winter hat. On a low table nearby rested a solitary Bible. “There’s always a Bible,” J. R. noted.

Neighbors stopped by during the day to express their support for the home takeover. None of them could recall the last legitimate tenants there. Biggs had run off “crackheads” who pulled up in a beat-up moving truck to strip the place, though she figured they later just parked around back. A man from the block mentioned a shooting that happened on the corner over the weekend, one of the 506 homicides in the city in 2012. “I got it on video,” J. R. said of the immediate aftermath of the weekend killing. “Shotgun to the back.” He was leading an anti-violence rally later that week, and he broke off to stop two lanky teenagers passing by to tell them about it, the guys nodding with confusion as J. R. talked excitably about how together they would take back the block.

J. R. loves all things Chicago no less than the mayor does — its history and its sports teams and its sudden and striking skyline. It was because he saw the society around his children crumbling that he felt a responsibility to act. And with a little investment from the banks and the big foundations and maybe even City Hall, he believed the Anti-Eviction Campaign could do much more than just engage in guerrilla-style economic warfare. The group could begin to put together the building blocks of a new kind of city, one that might even entail some sort of community land trust and cooperatively owned property.

Jacques Gourguechon, a principal with the city-planning consulting firm Camiros, had worked in these outlying Chicago neighborhoods and also helped develop strategies to shrink sections of Buffalo. He told me that a city has a responsibility to sustain the parts of it that, at least for the moment, have lost vitality. As a planner, he believed in the bigger sweep of history, the shifting promise of global economic cycles, and he imagined a time in the future when the world would again need the services of an Englewood. “Think about Rome,” he said, by way of example. About 1,000 years ago, the population there had shrunk to something like 20,000; now the city was bustling with more than two million people.

On the second floor of the Prairie Avenue home, the three bedrooms were largely undamaged. The thick oak doors were adorned with what appeared to be original handles of multifaceted glass. The afternoon light poured into the upstairs living room through floor-to-ceiling windows. The room contained a decorative fireplace and arched entranceways. The hardwood floor, still relatively new-looking after a century, glistened.

Marveling at it all, J. R. thought about the same thing that often came to mind when he first started in on an abandoned home. He remembered Michael Jordan winning those six championships during the '90s, saying to Bob Costas in the postgame interviews, “This one is special.” That’s what J. R. told himself as he bagged up the trash at the Prairie Avenue home. This is the one. This one can make a difference.

[Ben Austen](#) is a contributing editor of Harper’s Magazine. He is working on a book about the history of the Cabrini-Green housing project.