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# Detroit Now + Then

The Pillars

Charles Brooks Jr.



Turning left off of Chalmers onto Waveney Street, it's hard to miss the corner house that stands tall and spans across a few lots on Lakewood. Two houses sit at the front of the property, connected by a large skywalk. A giant fountain can be seen decorating the front of the property, while a large garage peaks out behind the skywalk, with a third "guest house" tucked behind the garage. The Castle, as it's known to many, was built by Charles Brooks Jr. and is truly unlike any other residence in Detroit.

I met him at his home, where his son, CJ, let me in through the front gates. He walks me past one house and towards the big garage where Charles is standing. He greets me in his cowboy boots and No Block Left Behind! sweatshirt, merch from his nonprofit. We take some pictures around the property while it's still golden hour. Afterwards, they invite me into the large garage, which actually reveals a giant clubhouse with barbecue smokers, a disco ball, tons of yellow and red neon lights, and a classic red pickup truck.

Charles has been a contractor and has owned his own construction company for over 30 years. He began to slowly build The Castle in the early 2000s after losing everything to a devastating house fire. Charles and his family then experienced bouts of homelessness, and he tells, **“I prayed to the good Lord and asked Him, if you get me up out of these streets, I will make a change and [an] impact as I begin to change my life.”**



After that, Charles’ construction business, Unique Construction, began to form. He shared that the Lord gave him a vision to start his work around his neighborhood. He then registered for the Detroit Land Bank auction. Charles’s next step was to preview some of the homes he had his eye on. “When I went through the neighborhood it was just so quiet. It was like the quiet time in The Wild West (movie) after they killed everyone off,” he says. The neighborhood was missing most of its residents after the housing market crashed in 2008. “These [were] beautiful homes and people just walked away from them,” he said with sadness in his voice.

When the auction came around, he couldn't believe he was the only person present at the auction. Charles was able to purchase several of the homes he had been eyeing as houses were selling for \$500, and vacant lots were only \$100. "We got one house, and there was another house, and before you know it, it was the whole block and then the whole neighborhood," he proudly says.

Afterwards, Charles took his wife, Charlene, on a ride through the neighborhood to show her their newly acquired real estate. She was in shock, looking around at all the conditions of the homes, but trusted that he had made a wise decision. They continued to talk about their new property, and she said, **"You left no stone unturned when you went down there. No block was left behind."**



A light went off in Charles's head as he asked his wife to repeat what she had just said; from there, he held onto those words, and the early stages of his movement began.

His process was simple enough; Charles would live in each property for a brief time while actively rehabbing them. Charles and his family worked around the clock on these homes. Some parts of the neighborhood did not have curbs or sidewalks, and he was able to add those important features. His ultimate goal was to move to a safe community:

**“I wanted a place for my children to be able to go somewhere and play.”**

He created No Block Left Behind!, still unsure what was ahead, “God still hadn’t revealed the whole plan,” but he started working on the homes he had just bought. First, he worked on making each house livable and allowing families to begin moving into them. In 2016, Charles was in the process of releasing his book, 4234 Lakewood: The Story Behind the Glory, when Fox News featured a big story about him and his work around the neighborhood. Charles had been working quietly around the neighborhood until the feature, when people began to recognize him. He shared that after the interview, people often thanked him for his work within the community, acknowledging how he “saved the neighborhood.” Some have dubbed Charles “the real mayor of the east side” because of his presence around the neighborhood and beyond.

At one point, Charles had so many homes in the neighborhood, each at different stages of renovation, that he hired a private security team to keep an eye out for him. “We had the real McCoy and we had the **whole neighborhood covered**,” he chuckled. But even security couldn’t stop what was to come.

Unfortunately, Charles ran into trouble when the city of Detroit and the Detroit Land Bank sued him, stating some of his properties were considered “blight.” In the report, the city claimed his homes posed an imminent harm and danger to the neighborhood due to the accessibility to trespass. Also, noting the grass had not been cut, despite the several inches of snow on the ground at the time. Eventually, evidence was presented before a judge, and he lost control of his homes to the Land Bank.



No attorney would take his case as he fought the city and the Land Bank over the ownership of his homes. After continuous back and forth with the city, he eventually signed a consent agreement stating he would fix the homes within two years to regain full control of them. He began fixing each and slowly meeting the court's demands, when his recently built guesthouse was slapped with the same lawsuit. Unlike Charles' other properties, his guesthouse was attached to the property where his family lived. The guesthouse was under new construction, with a brand new roof, exterior, and doors. It was obviously an active construction site, so Charles assumed the city had made a mistake labeling it unsafe.

Charles contacted the city to inquire about the latest case regarding his guesthouse. After speaking with the city, they assured Charles that the most recent filing was a mistake and that he had nothing more to worry about. They then asked Charles what the addresses of his other properties were to prevent this from happening again. Charles said he could "finally wipe the sweat off of his brows," and he shared his list of property addresses.

Three weeks later, Charles was hit with three more lawsuits from the city regarding the addresses he had given them. He felt tricked and confused. He was then forced to sign another consent agreement to fix those properties despite the lack of evidence supporting the accusation of blight.

The Pillars



Charles explained the cycle he began to notice: someone buys a home from the Land Bank, begins renovations, is contacted by the city and hit with a lawsuit, loses the house to the Land Bank, and now the Land Bank resells that same home for more profit because it's in a better state than it was originally sold. He realized this process could happen a few times in just one house, and sadly, many citizens have experienced this cycle and lost.

Charles was almost in default and failing to comply with the city. At the same time, he and his family were dealing with health issues. His wife had just had surgery, yet the city demanded he show up for court. **"They didn't care,"** he sighed.

As the deadline approached, Charles and his attorney decided to sell his houses even though he did not believe there would be any interested buyers during this time of year. Charles had suffered a stroke and the COVID-19 virus in the midst of everything. He was still trying to heal and recuperate at home when the city issued another lawsuit against his guesthouse.

It was like déjà vu. Charles began to dissect the paperwork, trying to make sense of it all, again. His prayers were answered when someone shared a video of him on their YouTube account, which gained over 200,000 views. Another person posted content about him, and it got over 5 million views. “It was going viral,” he exclaims, “social media is crazy. You got the **good**, the **bad**, and the **ugly**.” People were in the comments threatening to rob Charles, while others celebrated his impact.

With a few viral videos and another Fox News story, he began to realize he was not alone in his fight against the Land Bank. He had the courage to publicly talk about this predatory cycle, even if it cost him his life. “It’s illegal what they’re doing,” he posted across his social media accounts. His comment made it back to the city of Detroit, and they began a petty and public back-and-forth via social media. The city claimed they didn’t take his properties and only wanted him to clean up. They called him a liar and posted a “diss” video featuring “Ether” by Nas. The track references the beef between Nas and Jay-Z, which he actually had not even known existed. “They had to school me on that. You remember when Nas and Jay-Z, the rappers, were beefing?”

People were showing up physically and online to support Charles, contacting the city, asking why they would do this to a citizen. The city then tried to backtrack, posting a cleanup statement after people shamed them for their unprofessional responses.

Charles Brooks Jr.



After years of drama, on April 14th, 2025, Charles received a call from the mayor's office about an emergency press conference being held that afternoon. The family paused celebrating their late son's birthday to attend this mysterious press conference. With Channel 4 and Fox News in attendance, the city wanted to publicly close the case and hand Charles his keys to symbolize that this feud was over. Regardless of the theatrics, no official statement from the city of Detroit or the Land Bank was issued regarding this case.

While recovering from years of battling the city, Charles began making music to help him in his healing process. His health continued to decline, and he began to feel like he couldn't bear any more, but he kept going. He continued to make music with his son, CJ, as a creative release and passion project. He credits his son as "one of the driving forces behind this whole thing, keeping me together."

As of today, he continues to work on his homes and his music. “The Lord took No Block Left Behind! in a totally different direction,” Charles says, **“I never want to see this happen to anybody again.”** Charles talks about his work in the neighborhood, stating, “All I ever wanted was a haven for my family and my business. I wasn’t trying to gentrify. You gentrify when you come into a neighborhood and destroy it.”

Charles has been in the neighborhood for 30 years and has slowly redeveloped the homes around him. “I would never leave this,” he smiles when talking about his home and his neighborhood.

**“The heart of Detroit is right here in the neighborhood, where the people stayed, fought the battles, and survived the war.”**



He mentioned downtown Detroit, where we see redevelopment depreciating the value of surrounding homes, but because Charles’ home cannot be classified like others due to its unique structure and blueprint, his neighbors’ homes were financially unaffected by his renovations.

Charles has been offered loans by wealthier individuals to help them fix up neighborhoods and sell them for the sake of large profits. However, Charles declined for the sake of the community. **“We have to stabilize [the neighborhood]. You kind of have to set something up with roots, with resources, ways that it can grow other than existing here. So that’s the game plan and slowly, but surely, it’s really taking route.”**

Charles and his family continue to host community events right in front of the Castle and plan to have an event for Thanksgiving, giving out meals to those in need. No Block Left Behind! knows no bounds and aims to keep evolving and serving its community.

