As the lingering foreclosure crisis pushes residents out of their homes, a campaign moves in.
Birth of the Cool

Jazz redefines the violin family. From outside the performance space at the Washington Park Arts Incubator, you might have easily mistook the instruments if you hadn’t known they were kicking off the first-ever Jazz String Summit that Friday night. Piano-like plucking and convincingly brassy bowing led the headlining group, Musique Noire, channel the genre’s typically cool sounds with instantly identifiable motifs. The septet gradually migrated from standard territory into their world fusion background, with the two violas and a violin producing a thoughtfulness and epic theatricality straight out of an orchestra pit, but still perfectly at home among guitar and drums.

Curated by cellist, composer, and Incubator resident artist Tomeka Reid, the sum- mit was a response to the sidelined of strings within the jazz world. “I don’t see them being programmed as often,” she said. Continuing into the weekend with community and professional workshops, Reid hoped that the summit would foster friendships among players while educating jazz fans. She’d pulled strings to pull string players together from Detroit, New York, and the Chicago area, scheduling four sets from four distinct groups for the opening night’s performance.

Duo Mary Halvorson and Jessica Pavone operated within jazz’s innovative periph- eries. Playing guitar and viola, they stepped back from sweet sorrow and bluesy depic- tion, instead articulating profoundly modern anxieties and preoccupations. Sighing, down-on-your-luck, hands-pocketed meditations are forever relatable, but just a little anachronistic for a decade informed by terror, war, and financial disillusionment—clamy with endemic sarcasm. Halvorson’s guitar patiently accommodated Pavone’s long and aching bows, her frantic plucking, her eerie and uncertain cold-techno niques. They treated their electronic pedals like second instruments, applying delay and fuzz at varied settings to produce anxiety-inducing textures. They adopted jazz’s soulful expressiveness but wrote it for the more tortured souls of today.

Reid’s own quartet mediated the middle and fringes of jazz. She played to some- thing recognizably jazzy, keeping pace with the swinging drums and bass, working against the guitar’s mellow strumming. Some spidery, ghostly bowing graced Reid and Pavone, but the quartet always returned to a head-bobbing and foot- tapping rhetoric. Reid firmly believes in winning full recognition for strings and graft- ing their uncompromised personality into the jazz ensemble. “We have to create our own language, our own distinct style,” she said. Her summit’s opening night con- dently reflected that objective, uniting string players by championing their inimitable and genre-evolving sounds, anticipating their inventive idioms. (Stephen Urrich)

Mythic Craft

Vera Videnovich had set up a tent to shield her greens and yarn from the drizzle at the arts and crafts fair by the cul-de-sac of Jackalope Coffee & Tea House, which also featured six other (slightly damper) vendors. “Vera’s a great soul,” said John Almonte, co-owner of the year-old Bridgeport cafe. “She’s one of the true champions of DIY and supporting bands in Chicago, and she worked for the Reader, so she’s a good person to know. A great soul, and her produce is incredible. I’m looking at her right now, thinking, ‘she’d better leave me some garlic.’” Videnovich is a proud jack-of-all-trades, and she’s not alone. Ruby Pinto, a batista at Jackalope, had set up a table with her jewelry and repurposed adornments. “I went to school for radio and then realized I hate media,” she says, smiling. I bought a Pogs pin (“100% BULLETPROOF”) from Pinto and indulged in some nineties nostalgia. A lesser reporter might have rolled her eyes at the precariousness.

The fair was very much a projection of its venue. Jackalope itself is an ode to Bridgeport’s craft-makers—it’s a twee utopia, a Raggedy Ann hedgegod of Easy pur- chases, original artwork, and old-time neighborhood artifacts. Two of the most recent additions are antique booths from Healthy Food Lithuanian Restaurant, which closed in 2009. Jackalope’s Bridgeport is a small town of craft beers, art galleries, and citi- zens willing to set up a table for a dizzyly Sunday morning sale. The lyric might name this contrived; Almonte and January Overton, his wife and co-owner, call it intended. They gather connections and keep their friends and artistic collaborators close. The couple knows everyone—many vendors featured at the fair are regulars of the cafe’s Thursday craft nights, or have work adorning the walls or windows.

Is a crafts economy actually possible? It’s a way of living so deeply steeped in the personal, so reliant on winking understanding between neighbors, so full of maple bacon donuts and recycled vinyl bicycle saddles, that it seems childishly naive to think that this could work in any stable contrivance. But there is something starry- eyed about Jackalope, and somehow it does work. Almonte buys into it with unswear- ing faith in the good souls that he and Overton have willed into their cul-de-sac. “I haven’t met a bad person yet,” he says. (Bea Halsky)
WHEN THE CHICAGO TRANSIT AUTHORITY ANNOUNCED THE CLOSURE OF NINE RED Line stations—stretching from the Cermak-Chinatown stop all the way down to 95th Street for reconstruction—the response was appropriately tepid and, in some cases, resentful. The CTA’s decision to shut down the ten-mile portion of the track angered many South Siders, especially given the less painful, albeit more expensive alternative: prolonging the reconstruction over four years by carrying out the work on weekends, leaving service undisturbed during peak hours. Alongside concerns over the new Ventra fare card system, which will increase fares for CTA users, the usual question looms large: are the South Side’s transportation needs being met? Cue the recent announce- ment of the bus rapid transit line project planned for the Ashland Avenue corridor.

Though nothing on the scale of the Red Line, the plan just might prove to be the kind of transit project the city needs, functioning as an effective conduit between the North and South Sides.

Bus rapid transit (BRT) is something of a rising trend in transportation. Basically, BRT is meant to replicate the efficiency and speed of a rail system while still using buses, which travel in designated bus-only lanes. In the case of Ashland, this will involve the delegation of inner bus-only lanes—a single lane for each bus, with landscaped medians and boarding platforms every half-mile at intersections. The project will require new types of buses, with doors on both sides in order to accommodate quick boarding. The buses will also synchronize with intersection lights to ensure even faster travel time. Existing services should remain untouched—while the #9 Ashland bus is intended to continue service even once the project is complete, the CTA esti- mates that Ashland BRT will cut those travel times by eight minutes for every two and a half miles travelled.

BRT has been administered fairly well elsewhere, from the Bronx to Bogotá, and notably in Cleveland with the HealthLine, a fifty-eight station line that was cited as something of a model for the Ashland project. Though the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC), a regional planning and policy organization, has been pushing for a BRT-type system in Chicago for some time now, it wasn’t until Rahm Emanuel assumed office and prioritized BRT that the project became imminent, according to MPC urban development director Peter Skosey.

While the MPC is not fiscally part of the project, they maintain involvement in the issue of local economic development. In the summer of 2011, the MPC, working close- ly with the CTA, the Chicago Department of Transportation, and the Department of Housing and Economic Development, released a report surveying all the major streets in the city to determine which ones might best handle BRT. They came up with a final list of ten streets. Ashland was chosen because it has the highest bus traffic of any- where in the city and according to its projected potential for substantial economic growth. The study not only looked to identify the busiest streets capable of handling the street width necessary for BRT, but also scoped out the prospects for economic revitalization. At the moment, the MPC is working to assess opportunities for retail redevelopment along Ashland. Skosey insists that, by contrast, a highway just doesn’t offer the same opportunity for positive spillover effects, adding definitively, “This is why Lake Shore Drive was not considered as an option.” Once finished, the BRT on Ashland will provide faster connections to the Orange Line on 31st Street and the Blue and Pink Lines farther north.

Take the Illinois Medical District. The complex is the largest urban medical district in the country, a gargantuan conglomerate of four major hospitals, two medical research universities, and assorted other companies spread out over some 560 acres. Heather Tarzcan of IMD explains their position: “With our expansion and the continued growth and development within the District, a service like bus rapid transit will enable patients, employees, and visitors to quickly get to and from the District and Ashland Avenue.” The IMD currently has fifty-five acres of raw land of which Tarzcan says the IMD is “aggressively seeking development.” With the expectation of increased devel- opment, the Ashland corridor already experiences high levels of traffic: daily, IMD draws nearly 75,000 visitors, in addition to its many employees. Couple this with the fact that a quarter of households near Ashland do not own a car, and it’s not hard to see why public transportation is a priority for the area.

Yet while BRT might very well foster economic development, such development may not necessarily offset its cost. At $10 million a mile, with a complete price tag hovering around a hefty $160 million, BRT won’t come cheap. Still, much of those costs won’t necessarily come out of the city’s budget. If plans come to fruition and funding comes through, the Ashland project will be constructed in phases, with the first phase running from 35th Street to Cortland Street, on the North Side. After that, public reac- tion will be gauged to determine whether or not the project will expand north and south along Ashland. At least for the initial phase, Skosey suspects the city will choose more “traditional financing.” He mentions the Small Starts Program, a federal initiative designed for transit projects of this nature. Other avenues include financing via the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act, which offers low-interest federal loans for transit projects.

While no municipal project that involves considerable infrastructural modifications lends itself to unanimous praise, backlash has been slow to materialize. Nevertheless, concerns persist about the project’s more immediate impact. Lying perpendicular to the Kinzie Industrial Corridor and thus necessitating the elimination of some left-hand turn lanes, it’s not quite clear how this might affect freight accessibility. Yet the CTA insists that it will preserve much of the existing parking, as well as loading zones for delivery trucks. In the end, these issues remain legitimate concerns, and it’s worth acknowledg- ing the level of speculation that is always involved. But Skosey, along with many others, is confident. Let’s hope that confidence is matched in prescience.
O n most days, the abandoned café at the corner of 75th and Dorchester might as well be any other. In many neighborhoods on the South Side, foreclosed properties like this one aren’t exactly hard to find. Pick a block—almost any block—and you’ll find an empty home, a boarded-up storefront. Maybe both. Maybe more. It’s a story people have long been familiar with.

But if you come on the right weekday night, the café will be in business. The Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign has moved in, and it’s here to stay. The campaign started around public housing in 2009, when some of the last buildings at Cabrini-Green were facing demolition, but it’s since turned its attention to the fight for housing itself.

“I’m a national organizing activist, not a local joker,” Willie “J.R.” Fleming says, confidently bounding into the café. J.R. is one of the campaign’s founders, and its current chairman. But for all his healthy self-assurance, he’s not blind to the daunting task they face. “What can you do when the government says, ‘We got no resources?’” he asks.

The Anti-Eviction Campaign’s solution is to provide its own. It scouts out abandoned homes and arranges for people to live in them, matching “homeless people with peopleless homes,” as J.R. likes to say. It canvasses neighborhoods to build up community support. It connects homeowners and tenants going through foreclosure with lawyers to help them with the legal process, and accompanies them to court. It protests at banks that have signed fraudulent and predatory loans. And now, it’s branching out to advocate for policy changes, too.

These neighborhoods were already in trouble when the financial crisis struck; when the housing market tanked, they were the hardest hit. And there’s little sign that things are improving.

The ten community areas with the highest rate of foreclosure filings in Chicago in 2012 were all on the South Side. Unsurprisingly, South Side neighborhoods also claim the highest rates of vacant properties. As of the end of 2012, over five percent of all properties in sixteen South Side community areas had been vacant for two or more years. The total for Chicago was 2.86 percent.

Abandoned properties have consequences. In 2012, an average of seven crimes were committed in vacant Chicago buildings or lots each day, according to a study by the Lawyers’ Committee for Better Housing, one of the groups that works with the campaign.

“You have neighborhoods that used to be stable communities being dragged down,” one of the other founders of the campaign, Toussaint Losier, says. “Go through parts of Woodlawn, Chatham, Auburn-Gresham, and there are no Century 21 signs.”

Meanwhile, the median sales prices of properties in neighborhoods such as Woodlawn and Washington Park have barely recovered—if at all—from the sharp hit they took in late 2008.

“There’s an old saying,” Losier, a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Chicago, recalls: “Blacks were the last hired and the first fired.” The worry is that, in the wake of the foreclosure crisis, this will be mirrored in housing.

“A lot of researchers are conservatively pointing to at least five more years of elevated [foreclosure] filings,” Patricia Fran, the buildings program administrator at the LCBH, tells me, pointing to a December 2012 report compiled by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty.

I ask her why it’s five years, as if that means things could get better in six. She hesitates. “It looks like this crisis that we’re having is far from over.”

A foreclosure crisis can easily work itself into a nasty cycle. When banks take over properties in distressed neighborhoods, they often make little attempt to sell, instead leaving them vacant. This in turn decreases the values of surrounding properties, causes community divestment, incites crime, and, if the cycle continues, begets further foreclosures. And many properties that went into foreclosure once are at risk to do so again. The neighborhoods are still deteriorating.

“In some parts of the city things are recovering; in others, not so much,” Spencer Cowan, vice president of the Woodstock Institute, an economic research group, says. The fact that, on the whole, slightly fewer foreclosure filings are being reported each year “doesn’t mean a community is getting better. In some communities, one in six properties have already been auctioned [due to foreclosure]. That’s a huge number.”

In fact, in nine of those ten most affected neighborhoods, yearly foreclosure filings that decreased from 2009 to 2011 went back up in 2012. Meanwhile, the cumulative percentage of units affected by foreclosure in Chicago rose from 9.5 percent in 2009 to 13.8 percent in 2011, to 15.4 percent in 2012, and is now over thirty percent in eight South Side community areas. It’s entirely possible that even as some of the foreclosure filing numbers improve, the actual situation in many of these communities could be getting worse.

“There used to be a saying that the divide between the North Side and the South Side was as big as the Chicago River,” J.R. recalls. “Now it’s as big as Lake Michigan.” That may be true, but there are also differences within the South Side itself—differences that can make broader market trends all the less relevant.
“The [real estate] market is very local, even to a neighborhood level,” Cowan says. Indeed, Brian Sleet, chief of staff for 6th Ward Alderman Roderick Sawyer, told me he could see the differences just between Chatham and the parts of Englewood in his ward, though both are struggling. Chatham has a more sizable elderly population, and more homes that have been paid off. And the numbers bear out: in 2012 there were five foreclosure filings per hundred residential parcels in Englewood, a filing rate second only to that of Burnside, southeast of Chatham. In Chatham, there were 3.8. (As a whole, the city experienced 2.4 filings per hundred parcels.)

These local differences only make the solutions for areas like Englewood more difficult. “Until we find out a way to figure out a multiple number of problems,” Cowan says—lack of private sector investment, high crime rates, education—“things aren’t going to get better.”

While it’s tough to sum up the mission of the campaign, the best way to describe it might be as a fight against this deterioration. As J.R. puts it, “the heart of the campaign is engaging community.” Much of the goal is to keep people in their homes, or to put them in others, but the campaign’s efforts aren’t strictly limited to real estate. When two or three homes on a block get boarded up, something essential is inevitably lost. Something that needs to be rebuilt.

The campaign’s idea is that a neighbor who pays no rent is better than having no neighbor at all. A family home with a well-mowed lawn is better than an empty drug house with broken windows. Putting “homeless people into peopleless homes” benefits the homeless first, but it benefits everyone else too.

“Part of what we tell people is that they have to be a good neighbor,” Losier explains. “You’re not just putting someone into a place, but trying to weave them into a community, too.”

When the campaign orchestrated its first move-in to an abandoned home, two summers ago, it was called “risky” in the headline of an article in the New York Times. Yet the family, Martha Biggs and her children, is still there. At one meeting, Biggs recounted a recent, failed eviction attempt. The sheriffs ended up having the wrong name, but when they came, the neighbors “were standing there like I was kin,” Biggs said. “They knew me.”

I ask J.R., who grew up in Cabrini and is now homeless and unemployed, what his community is.

“The city of Chicago is my community,” he says. “I’m not anti-Chicago, I’m not anti-America. I’m pro-people.”

No campaign can stand as a perfect barometer of the issues it responds to, but the pattern between the foreclosure crisis and the Anti-Eviction Campaign is striking. The campaign is only a few years old, and already its activities have shifted dramatically.

“We didn’t necessarily plan to shift from [public] housing to foreclosures,” Losier says. “The ground we were working on was shifting.”

When the campaign began in Cabrini back in 2009, most of its leaders—like J.R.—were residents of the projects. Its first eviction blockade, in November of that year, was part of the fight against the public housing shutdown. Part of the reason they branched out was that there was already a similar group of residents fighting on behalf of Cabrini.

But there were other reasons. Their first clients came to them. A woman who was trying to turn a building into a daycare center in Rogers Park was going through foreclosure, and the campaign tried to help her keep the property.

They lost, but in court they met another family facing foreclosure. They put all their efforts toward the case, and it worked. The family got a loan modification in early 2010.

More people came seeking support. “We were like, ‘Hey, maybe we can help you out.’” Losier says. “We saw how it could become a broader community effort.”

The campaign started moving faster and holding press conferences. Martha Biggs moved into the first abandoned home that June. Before long, the Anti-Eviction Campaign was a group with clout. It was a small group, but one with enough force to win concessions in certain isolated cases.

And when they started taking more cases, they noticed a trend. At the start of the housing crisis, the face of foreclosure had long been the high-risk mortgage, the predatory loan. Those problems have not gone away. “But we found a lot of people [affected by foreclosure] whose rates weren’t going up,” Losier says. Tenants, especially, were an issue.

When an apartment unit goes through foreclosure, the tenants are usually not responsible. Yet they still feel the effects. If the property closes, they have to find somewhere else to live.

This is often the case when properties are taken over by a bank. “Banks don’t want...
to be landlords, simply put," Fron, from the LCBH, explains. "They make efforts to vacate properties almost as soon as possible.”

In 2009, Congress passed the Protecting Tenants at Foreclosure Act. The law established guarantees for tenants who reside in properties that get foreclosed, including a ninety-day notice before asking them to vacate their home, and the right to live out the length of their lease if it extends further. The Illinois Mortgage Foreclosure Law further stipulates that all tenants must be notified when their property exchanges hands, and Chicago’s Residential Landlord Tenant Ordinance requires that any “successor landlord,” including banks, maintain the property. But these laws are often violated.

In a 2010 report, the LCBH found that—among other violations—banks taking over properties had refused to collect rent, forced tenants out early, incorrectly informed them of their rights, and shut off crucial utilities. One sample notice cited in the report warns: “Everyone has to vacate this property within one week or you will be evicted!”

"It’s a daunting prospect to move when it’s out of your control," Fron says, “especially for people of limited means. Most tenants aren’t aware of the foreclosure on their home until very late in the process, usually until there’s a new owner.”

Even when tenants are legally displaced, the impact of foreclosures can be devastating. With fewer properties and more tenants, it becomes harder to find affordable housing. Families switch communities, and children switch schools—if a new home is found at all.

Through the campaign, Losier has come across many who “aren’t necessarily living on the street, but living on family members’ couches.”

“This has gone on for so long without direct action,” Fron laments.

There have been some efforts to change policy. In February 2012, federal and state prosecutors won a national foreclosure settlement against some of the nation’s largest banks, freeing up $25 billion for assistance to those who had been affected by fraudulent bank practices. Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan’s office has pledged that $70 million from the settlement will be given to the “Illinois communities fraught with vacant and abandoned properties that have been hardest hit by foreclosure.”

Cook County is asking for $20 million of the Illinois pool. One of the ideas is to establish a land bank to identify vacant properties and connect them with new owners, who would eventually be expected to pay taxes. But the land bank is designed to move slowly, so as not to shake up the market, and it’s unclear how much money it will actually get. A board of directors was set up in February; they met for the first time two weeks ago.

Another idea that has been put forth is the “Keep Chicago Renting” ordinance, introduced by 33rd Ward Alderman Richard Mell last year. The ordinance would require banks that take over foreclosed properties with active, rent-paying tenants to pay $12,000 to each tenant before forcing them to leave. Similar laws have been passed elsewhere—notably in Los Angeles, where the requirement is $18,000. Still, the ordinance has been met with resistance, and a general lack of attention to the gravity of the situation on the South Side remains.

I called Alderman Mell’s office, on the North Side, in Irving Park, to check on the status of “Keep Chicago Renting” last Thursday. I explained I was a reporter writing a story about the lingering foreclosure crisis. “Foreclosure crisis?” the staffer on the line asked, “Do you mean in California or Florida?”

No, I said, I’m writing about the foreclosure crisis in Chicago.

“I don’t know of any foreclosure crisis in Chicago,” the staffer told me, “You must mean California or Florida. Not here.”

As it turned out, the ordinance had been approved for a full vote before the City Council earlier that day (with the payout reduced to $10,600). The vote was held on June 5, after this piece went to press.

As much as the campaign supports these efforts—J.R. was visibly excited at the news that “Keep Chicago Renting” would be put before the whole council—it’s fight is still bigger. The campaign’s self-proclaimed mission is the fight for the “human right to housing.” It’s not something that’s going to be solved by incremental solutions alone.

The idea behind the “human right to housing” is not meant to be abstract or theoretical, but something very simple. The campaign wants people to realize that what they’re fighting is too staggering to be summed up in mushy terms of right or wrong, legal or illegal. It’s too urgent, too essential. As Losier puts it, “It’s not necessarily about what’s right or what ought to happen, but fundamental human dignity.”

Or, as one member at a recent meeting said: “If you don’t have a house you die. What is all this about ‘inalienable rights’?”

Of course, the idea of a human right to housing is not exactly new. “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including…housing,” states Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration was ratified by the United Nations and signed by the United States in 1948. “Nevertheless,” reports the NLCHP, “government policies have not traditionally treated housing as a right.”

The center recommends that “U.S. housing advocates can and should use international human rights standards to frame public debate...and support community organizing efforts.”

A bigger fight requires a bigger approach. Losier cites the “sword and shield” strategy advocated by City Life, a similar group in Boston. The strategy mixes action and defense, fights against the system and fights for individuals. The legal fight is important, but it’s not the only one. Civil disobedience is justified, necessary even. In Boston, the “sword” often entails sit-ins and blockades to protest planned evictions. But in Chicago, the Anti-Eviction Campaign has had to adapt to a different set of circumstances. “The sheriff doesn’t tell you when he’s going to evict you,” Losier remarks. They’ve only gotten to do a few sit-ins. But the campaign hasn’t been idle. They picketed at a Wells Fargo in April, and they’re planning a march at the same bank branch where one of its members was given a fraudulent loan.

“If we combine what is happening in court with stuff on the ground...that really makes a difference,” Losier explained at one meeting at the café, in preparation for the bank protest. “We can’t just be defensive, like the Bulls. We need offense.” Several people nod in agreement. “And I mean Derrick Rose-type offense,” Losier adds, “Not that little guy who showed up in the playoffs.”

Meetings at the café are all-purpose, a mixed bag of strategic planning, situational updates, and individual assistance. Just about everything takes place around one long table in the center of the room. Pamphlets, newspapers, and protest signs litter the café’s periphery. There’s a certain degree of order, but things are also fairly flexible. The first time I went to a meeting, Losier immediately sat down to help a new couple sort out their case. The meeting didn’t get going until he’d come close to finishing, about half an hour late. At another, J.R. started talking, then drifted into powerful sermon. He stood up, voice booming: “Don’t move. Stay in your home. Fight.”
ad
“It’s the story of the walkaways,” he later explained to me. Too many tenants and homeowners leave when they still have a chance of keeping their residence. Too many don’t know enough about the legal process—or don’t have the money to spend—to defend themselves. “We definitely have a system that’s failed people,” J.R. says, looking hard into the distance.

One man at the meetings has been in foreclosure for twenty-six months. Another came back who’d been helped in court by the campaign in 2011, worried he might be about to go into foreclosure again.

A current case concerns Emma Harris. Harris is ninety-one years old, soft-spoken with a merry face. She used to own two six-unit apartment buildings, until, she says, a property manager she hired stole her money. She went into foreclosure, and had to refinance in 2008. But the rents she had to report to the bank in order to get a new loan were too high. “I had to lie about them,” she told me.

There’s not a lot that can get Harris down. Even in a protest on her behalf, documented on the campaign’s YouTube channel, she can be seen standing next to J.R., beaming constantly. Still, her son, Thurlester Wilson, attests to the difficulty of the situation. “This is taking a toll on the family,” he said at one meeting, citing “emotional damages.”

Another regular at the meetings is Michael Henderson, who’s been fighting for his house for longer than the Anti-Eviction Campaign has been around. Henderson has told his story before—in an e-book available for Kindle—but he’s not afraid of telling it again. He rattles off the facts of his foreclosure case with an easy, if rightly agitated, compulsion. “This stuff is a big joke,” he concludes.

He had a heart attack in 2009. He gets by without utilities, boiling his own water. But, as he told me, “I’m fighting my case whether I lose it or not.”

As the foreclosure crisis lingers, no one will be able to fight it out alone. It’s hard for one homeowner or tenant to handle the foreclosure process separately; it’s even harder for one person to fight the process that made this situation possible.

“I asked Wilson, one of the more openly enthusiastic members of the campaign, what drives him and his mother to keep coming out to meetings, to keep pushing for their property.

“Whatever we have to do,” he told me. But how many people are willing to go that far? How many people can afford to pay the mortgage?

That is, perhaps, why J.R. and the others are so intent on engaging community. “If you feel like you’re the only one, you’re in trouble,” one man told me, during a café meeting. “This organization was responsible for saving my house. If they call for a rally, I’m there.”

As the foreclosure crisis lingers, no one will be able to fight it out alone. It’s hard enough for one homeowner or tenant to handle the foreclosure process separately: it’s even harder for one person to fight the process that made this situation possible.

“A lot of people will walk past an abandoned home and think, ‘That’s bad,’ ” Losier explains. “We want to be in a position to change how people think about things. We’re trying to get people to realize they can do something about it.”

“You can’t do any of it without canvassing,” J.R. adds. The Anti-Eviction Campaign may just be entering a formative stage. Last week they had a promising meeting as part of an application for a grant. This summer, J.R. hopes to expand to hold open community workshops. The hope is that, as they broaden their reach, they can broaden their results. It’s good to be in a position where you have the clout to win back a home or get a modification on a loan, but it’s a position the campaign never wanted to have to be in at all.

“She worked forty years for that,” Thurlester Wilson says of his mother. “Would you leave that property?”

Fame
“i feel it coming together”
by Bess Cohen

When Ms. Mailey do that, it means she’s stressed out,” a student whispers to me, painting at her drama teacher, Ms. Mailey’s digging her finger-tips into the side of her head and scanning the auditorium. It’s two days before show time for the thirty students in Libby Middle School’s production of “Fame,” and things are still just coming together. The microphones, strapped to faces with masking tape, keep malfunctioning. The drumline, with instruments made of plastic buckets from Lowe’s, is not there to rehearse with the dancers. And after four-plus hours of rehearsal, the students’ focus is waning. Two girls are doing homework in the audience and mind- ing their younger sisters, waiting for their scene, and, despite the chaos, one tells me they’re ready. “We just need to practice some more,” she says.

In many ways, Libby looks like other schools in Englewood. It is designated as an on-probation, Level 3 school (the lowest academic performance rating), its student body is comprised entirely of African-American and Hispanic students from low-income homes, and it was on CPS’ first list of potential school closings. But this scene is at the heart of what sets the school apart. For the past four years, all students, Fifth through eighth grade, have had the opportunity to be part of the spring musical, the annual
Yateece Johnson is in eighth grade and doesn't sing as loudly in rehearsals as she should and anyone who meets her knows she can. "When I'm at home, I sing all day and I sound so good...but I get nervous in front of people," she says. Yateece's neighborhood high school is Richards Career Academy, a Level 2 school, but she is insistent on leaving this neighborhood because "there's too much violence." Instead, she'll go to Roosevelt High School, a lower-performing school than Richards, but a safer one and all the way on the North Side. She wanted to go to Chicago High School for the Arts, or ChiArts, one of the few schools in Chicago that, like the school in "Fame," has a competitive audition process and rigorous area-specific arts training, but she overslept the day of the audition.

Yateece is just one example of a Libby student who bears an uncanny resemblance to her fictional character, sassy Carmen Diaz, who drops out of school to become a star. "I wanna be like Beyoncé," she told me one day. "Her birthday is in September, my birthday is in September. We get the same sign. She got talent, I got talent." In past years, Libby has done "The Wiz," "Grease," and "The Lion King," but "Fame" gives these middle school students a chance to portray kids grappling with pressures familiar to life at Libby. The play follows a group of students through four years of an intense New York performing arts high school, condensing their relationships (only barely alluded to in Libby's production), academic difficulties, and performance successes into an hour-and-a-half mashup of both the original 1980 musical and the 2009 remake. The dancers get a chance to perform a variety of styles—a little ballet, hip hop, lyrical, and African dance—all executed with a precision that demonstrates their em bodied many of the themes that students articulated to me, an awareness of the importance of personal responsibility and a respect for hard work. The school's arts program is part of the vision that Kurt Jones brought to the school when he became principal six years ago. The middle school curriculum at Libby requires students to choose one arts class—dance, drama, art, choir, or drumline—each semester. Jones, who studied drama and has taught in Chicago and Peoria, encourages students not to stick with just one.

"What we've done is try to replicate what is done on the North Side," says Jones. "It gives them the opportunity to find their own skills...to find what it is that makes them tick. If we don't get it to them, they'll never know." Since the arts program began, attendance has improved, violence has lessened, and Jones is "really starting to see academic growth flourish." Eighty-three percent of students met their academic growth targets this year, suggesting that Libby is on its way out of the Level 3 designation.

Jones estimates that the entire program costs about $100,000 each year, but it is funded mostly by a $75,000 national grant from the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program and is made possible through a partnership with the YMCA. According to Nicole York, the YMCA Resource Coordinator at Libby, the YMCA has similar partnerships in fourteen other Chicago schools. The other partnerships have different focuses, like gardening or homework help, but all offer programming for parents as well, such as GED and computer classes.

While there are high schools in Chicago that offer ample arts programs, these programs are rare in elementary and middle schools, especially on the South Side. Only last November did CPS approve an "Arts Education Plan" that will require 120 minutes of arts programming in all K-8 schools, to begin in the Fall. As it stands, access to programs like Libby's is incredibly limited.

O n closing night, a change has come over the auditorium. As is tradition, the final show is a dinner and fundraiser, casting guests—a mixture of teachers, parents, Mr. Jones' friends, CPS administrators, and YMCA staff members—$35 each. The auditorium is decorated in a Hollywood theme and the young actors serve dinner to their fans. Three days of thunderstorms and flooding, however, have caused a power outage in the neighborhood. "Mr. Jones freaked out," Laneise Cotton—a soloist in the show—told me, giggling. Power was restored forty-five minutes before the start of the event, adding some true production drama to the night.

Backstage, the dancers are wearing perfect ballerina buns. The younger siblings who had wandered around the auditorium during rehearsals sit on their mothers' laps in the audience. In the final scene, the students' graduation from high school, Laneise, who had refused to project her voice in rehearsals, belts her solo in "Hold Your Dream" and struts in her high heels. The cast gathers around her in graduation gowns, supplementing her immense voice with song and clapping.

Laneise will sing the song again on June 12, at her own graduation. While she was casually wandering around before the show I asked her why she wasn't getting ready for the solo. She just smirked and said, "It's a piece of cake." Anesa Daniels, this year's salutatorian and a powerful presence on the stage, echoed this, saying she was far more nervous about graduation than the show. "I'm entering the real world," she said, recolling into her seat.

Before the play began, two PSAs that students created were shown, one about gun violence, called "Drug Dealing is Not Appealing," and one about why each performer wanted to be famous, appropriately called "Fame." The juxtaposition of these videos embodied many of the themes that students articulated to me, an awareness of the realities of their community. A striving to transcend those realities, and a grasp on some idea of how to do that.

One mother, whose son graduated from Libby three years ago and still participates in theater in high school, admitted that "being a young black boy in this community is not always easy," but said that Libby "introduces the kids to things they didn't know they have." Felicia Riggins, Cimarron's mother, sat proudly in the first row. Because of this program, she says, "He's blossoming into a very disciplined, well-rounded young man. He knows now that the decisions we make determine what happens tomorrow."

The day after seeing the show, Cimarron's little brother demonstrated the dance moves he had seen in "Fame" for his third-grade classmates. "He was like, I wanna be in the play," Cimarron told me, before turning back to make sure he hadn't missed his cue.

JUNE 6, 2013 | CHICAGO WEEKLY
The Woman Behind the Lens

by Sasha Tycko

PHOTOGRAPHS TELL TWO STORIES. ONE OF THESE STORIES OCCURS IN FRONT OF the camera, and this story is supposed to be objective. But this is a filtered reality, one selected by the person on the other end of the lens. This other story, the one that exists behind the camera, is told through the photographer's artistic decisions. A photograph is an autobiography.

In 2007, a twenty-six-year-old realtor named John Maloof went to an auction at RPN Sales in Chicago. For a few hundred dollars, he purchased a set of trunks containing thousands of negatives and rolls of film, hoping to find some photographs for the book he was writing about his Portage Park Neighborhood. While he didn’t find what he was looking for, he did discover Vivian Maier.

Maier is the mysterious camera-wielding nanny who, for over forty years, took more than 100,000 photographs of Chicago’s streets. Before Maloof’s unwitting discovery, no one had ever seen Maier’s work. He posted them on a Flickr forum and asked experienced photographers what to do with them. Her striking photographs of Chicago’s streets have since received worldwide acclaim. Her work has been exhibited across the United States, as well as in London, Germany, Denmark, and Norway. Though little is known about her personal life, Maloof and others have been working to piece together the story of this secretive artist.

It’s important to think of Maier first as an artist, and of her work as art. Her photographs are inventive and interesting. She was constantly moving around, shooting people’s legs, shoes, heads, and backs. She had an eye for composition, and she often shot from odd angles, creating uncanny images. In two photographs of sleeping men, for example, Maier angled the camera so that each man’s head is cropped from view.

To label Maier a street photographer oversimplifies her massively varied body of work. Whereas the objective of street photography is to capture the candid moment, her subject matter is carefully selected—a boy’s knobby knees, a woman’s skirt flapping in the wind, the creases in a man’s pant leg. She didn’t use a zoom lens, so every close-up of someone’s back or knees means Maier was lurking two or three feet away. The muted creepiness of this is captured in the sniffs and surprised looks of some her subjects’ faces.

Some of her photographs are aesthetic meditations—the shadowy lines of a fire escape cutting across a building, a stark line of telephone poles against a white sky. From her negatives, you can see that she would photograph the same subject several times, trying to find the right composition or lighting.

Her sensibility is hard to categorize. She took revealing and humanizing photographs of the working-class. But she also photographed bow-tied men and women in mink furs. Some of her photographs are moody and dark, but she also captured happy scenes of smiling children and days at the beach. Her aesthetic varies too, from tightly framed shots of faces and objects, to looming, architectural landscapes.

Perhaps the fact that Maier never exhibited her work contributed to her wide range of styles and subject matters. She never received critical feedback for it, either from the public or from individual acquaintances. She was never forced to curate her own work, so she didn’t have to consider cohesive themes. Maybe she only cared about the moment of the photograph, because she didn’t even develop all of her negatives: Maloof possessed some 2,000 undeveloped rolls of film. 

On Thursday, Rich Cahan and Ron Gordon told the Vivian Maier story to a packed crowd at the Bridgeport Art Center. Cahan recently co-authored a book about Maier entitled “Vivian Maier: Out of the Shadows,” and Gordon is a photographer and master printer who photographed Chicago’s streets around the same time as Maier. As they displayed some of her photographs in a slideshow, they crafted a narrative for her life’s work. The audience was clearly familiar with her story and eagerly asked the pair questions throughout the talk.

As narratives go, Maier’s is pretty sparse. We know that she was born in France, and lived in New York. We know that she came to Chicago in 1956, but we don’t know why. She spent most her life in Chicago until her death in 2009. During that time, she worked as a nanny. When a relative left her half of an estate in France, she sold it and used the money to travel the world and photograph what she saw.

Maier frequented art museums and galleries and was an avid filmmaker. Her strong interest in art suggests aesthetic aspirations. But she was also an obsessive collector, compelled to document her life. She always requested a lock on her bedroom door, and on the rare occasion that the family was given a glimpse of her room, they found stacks and stacks of newspapers covering every surface.

Her self-portraits shed light on her other work. They’re a little odd—she always shot these photographs in mirrors and reflective windows, and her likeness is usually obscured in some manner. She also frequently photographed her shadow, which appears on sidewalks and on buildings. Sometimes, a portion of her shadow appears in photograph of other people. Her presence is ghostly; her life voyeuristic.

We are the voyeurs twice removed. Since the discovery of her work in 2007, people have been reconstructing the life and personality of an obsessively private woman by looking at what she looked at. The fact that we think we can do that speaks to a special quality of photography. Because every photograph is tied to a specific time and place, we tend to believe that photography can honestly represent reality. Each photograph represents a fraction of a second of Maier’s life.

From our determination to know more about this mysterious artist, we learn something about photography. It is at once art and documentary; it reveals a conversation between a subject and its object. For one self-portrait, Maier situated herself in between two facing mirrors, with her camera on a tripod. The result is surreal, with her image repeating into infinity. By looking at what she looked at, we gaze at her.
2013 Youth Spectacle Interventions: Soonic Boom

When people say that they want their voices to be heard through art, they usually don’t expect their voices to be pro-
jected from a street speaker. Not for the smallest avant-garde of Bakedown, a performing arts group that specializes in spec-
tacular theatre. As a precursor, “Interventions” are those works of art that are created in the public sphere. As part of their pro-
ject Youth Spectacle Interventions 2013, Bakedown continues to color outside the lines. Through their Neighborhood Arts Pro-
gramming, the group has created the Sonia Boom, a cost supporting a sixteen-foot-tall column of street speakers that will be touring public spaces through June, promising to amplify the voices of over 1,000 Chicago's year. Can you hear me now? Human Square Peace Rally, 117 E. Wacker Dr. Saturday, June 8, 10am-1pm. (312)204-0640. red

Much Ado About Nothing

Much Ado About Nothing, one of Shakespeare’s lighter comedies, has come to the International House. The last con-
tinuance will up as this Sunday at 6pm, following two perform-
ances this past week. Sunday, “Much Ado,” for the plays who don’t have a picnic, is happily devoid of deaths and ends with two-
count scene readings. In this piece space between framing and editing “Anna Jarvis” shows what a media of the play that is coming out this Friday, just to be time to be com-
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Fiesta Back of the Yards is a twenty-two-year-old community fes-
tival offering junk food sold from trailers, roller coaster rides, live music on the Main Stage, games, and more. Come for a few hours, or stay the entire day. With thousands of other vibrant festival goers. Summer is here, and it’s as much of fun as you remember. Like a day across the city, the fair will welcome music and dance groups alongside rides of various. Enjoy a bountiful scene from the White Sox cue, and a mobile dance party sponsored by Ed. Peppee. The fair is the perfect place to hang out with friends, family, and more, but is the immediate vicinity of Louis Talia’s great public sculpture that will find its way to the Garden of American Allegory. Talia’s sculpture ingeniously exercises his sense of self to tackle the complex of social realities like race, class, and politics. With)

ALGAR

ABARB

The event boasts an incredible lineup of Muslim rappers and DJs. The headliner, Blackstar, consists of Mos Def, Talib Kwali, and guest duet Ali Shaheed Muhammad. The Hypnotic Brass Ensemble, created as a result of Philip Cicero’s eight musical sons, will also make an appearance, as will the Embodied, Family, Soul, Brother Ali, and behind Chicago americano hip hop and RB soft over the entire of the event. Performers will be able to Chicago fusion ensemble Zemb, Latin hip hop academic the Macyac, Malaysian dynasty of D-Macs, and Pekan desert Sherman Venus Parks. Nujabes, Pyramid, 7345 S. Andrew, Sunday, June 15, 10am-12pm. (312)595-4791. (suggested donation, which goes persuasively consider-
ing what you’re getting). imanstreets.org (Nathan Worcester)

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