



Because of Les Brown's Leadership...

Because of Les' leadership, CCH was mobilized 25 years ago. Les, then director of social work services for Travelers and Immigrants Aid (TIA), had documented the growing number of homeless people showing up at Union Station, the Greyhound bus terminal, and O'Hare Airport.

Working with staff from TIA and the Jewish Council for Urban Affairs, Les organized the group that became CCH in 1980.

He was elected the first president of the CCH Board of Directors, and was named executive director in 1988. He became director of policy in 1990.

"Les was profoundly disturbed by what he saw and had a vision for what could be," said his wife, Diana Leifer. "He used common-sense and plain-talk, always infused with good humor. He seemed able to motivate people to take the high road and do what was right."

"He was chief strategist and idea man behind most of the coalition's many successes," said Ed Shurna, executive director of CCH. "He was also the originator or one of the founders of numerous organizations created to help homeless people."

In 1983, CCH hosted the first national conference on homelessness. From this meeting, the National Coalition for the Homeless was launched, and Les was asked to work on its first board.



Les also spearheaded the decade-long campaign of public protests over the building of Presidential Towers, an upscale, government-subsidized West Loop complex with 2,463 high-rent units. Settlements from this high-profile campaign provided the funds that launched

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the Chicago Low-Income Housing Trust Fund in 1990, and by 1994, pressured developers into setting aside 165 units for low-income residents.

He also oversaw the South Loop Campaign for Development Without Displacement. This two-year campaign secured a 1996 commitment from the city of Chicago to

build two new single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels and prevented demolition of six other SROs.

In the mid-1990s, Les founded Growing Home, Inc. Since 2002, the non-profit group has taught homeless people how to grow and market organic food grown on a city lot and 10 acres in LaSalle County. Les was serving as the founding president of its board of directors at the time of his death.

In 1998, Les oversaw the launch of the CCH statewide housing campaign, *It Takes a Home to Raise a Child*. A year later, the General Assembly voted unanimously to enact the campaign's first initiative, creating the Illinois Homeless Prevention Program.

A talented piano-player and keyboard artist, Les performed jazz and blues at Chicago clubs, church meetings and the annual CCH concert, *Hopefest*. Thanks Les' musical talents and dry wit, organizers

usually turned to him to write protest songs for CCH rallies and marches.

Les achieved another milestone in his life 20 years ago: He underwent a heart transplant at Loyola University Medical Center in December 1984. He retired from CCH in February, after experiencing complications related to cancer.

A licensed clinical social worker, Les held a master's degree in social work from Loyola University. Born in Doraville, Georgia, he earned a bachelor's in psychology from South Carolina's Erskine College before serving three years in the U.S. Air Force as a medical corpsman.

A memorial service will be held in May for Les, who was 64. Besides his wife, survivors include a son, Jesse Brown, a daughter, Mari Herrera-Zinman, a sister, Claudia Lewis, and two grandchildren.

The Brown family asks that in lieu of flowers, memorials be sent in Les' name to the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless or to Growing Home, Inc., at 1325 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago, 60605.

INSIDE

A Tribute to Les Brown	2
Coalition Updates	2
Policy Paper:	
One-Stop Employment	insert
News Briefs:	
■ Prevention Fund	3
■ Renaissance 2010	3

A TRIBUTE TO LES BROWN

By Michelle R.B. Saddler

On April 11, the social justice community lost a good friend who made life better for thousands of people in Illinois and throughout the United States. Les Brown, founder of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, was a man who made a mind-boggling impact on this world, yet who was humble to the point of amusement. As the Founder of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, then Board President, then Executive Director, then Policy Director, Les was the only person who steadily “worked his way down the hierarchy at CCH.” In fact, at one point, Les insisted that everyone at the Coalition earn the same amount of money—from the lady who cleaned the office to himself as the Executive Director! Les truly respected everyone’s contributions in life, regardless of position.

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I first heard of CCH and Les Brown while attending business school in 1984, when a professor included a clipping about CCH in the week’s readings. I was immediately struck by the value of CCH and its belief that housing is a human right in a just society. I admired CCH’s approach of partnering *with* people who are homeless, rather than partnering merely *on their behalf*. I was impressed by Les Brown’s goals of systemic change, and by his willingness to take on hard-hitting advocacy

Photo by Liz Steger



Michelle Saddler is a longtime volunteer and former Board President of CCH.

From left are Michelle Saddler, Les Brown and former CCH President John Donahue, who passed away last year.

campaigns that combined policy work, community organizing and direct action. Les and the Coalition made sure that people in power heard the voice of the homeless.

Seven years later, after listening to my innermost callings, I looked CCH up in the phone book and called them. When then-Executive Director Les Brown returned my phone call, I was awestruck and amazed and asked, “Is this THE Les Brown???” Being the humble guy he was, he replied, “Well, actually, no,” [referring apparently to the famous motivational speaker or the renowned band leader.] “I’m ... some other Les Brown ... at the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless.”

This “other” Les Brown founded not only CCH, but he also was a founder of more than five other organizations and partnerships impacting homeless and formerly homeless people throughout Chicago and beyond. These organizations included Chicago’s Streetwise newspaper (which has employed more than 7,300 homeless and formerly homeless people), the Illinois Coalition for the Homeless, the Interfaith Council for the Home-

less, the Community Justice Initiative, and most recently Les created “Growing Home,” an organic farm that provides job training and placement to low-income people. This “other” Les Brown impacted the lives of tens of thousands of people through legislative change, creation of affordable housing, personal touch, employment, and empowerment. This “other” Les Brown did all of these things as a talented jazz musician, as a man with a comic flair for

story telling and impersonations, and as one of the nation’s longest surviving recipients of a heart transplant. And as his wife Diana so movingly and accurately said, “He found room in his heart for me.” Indeed, for each of us.

There is no way that I can do Les justice in a written tribute. To properly honor Les, we must continue to work for justice and follow the example of our friend—the famous Les Brown.

COALITION

Updates

NEW STAFF:



Photo by xx

In April 2005, Eithne McMenamin joined Chicago Coalition for the Homeless

as a Policy Specialist. She graduated with an MSW in 2001 and has since worked at Stroger Hospital and Jane Addams Hull House as a clinical social worker. Eithne decided to join CCH’s policy team out of a desire to effect change on a larger scale than is possible working with people one-on-one. When not working towards systemic change and individual advocacy, Eithne likes to travel and spoil her two cats—Greta and Zoey.

Prevention Fund News Brief

Thousands of households a risk of becoming homeless were turned away from a statewide grant program in 2004 because of insufficient funding, a study by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless shows.

Illinois' Homeless Prevention Program was created in 1999 after advocacy by CCH and its statewide housing campaign, *It Takes A Home To Raise a Child*. In its first five years, through June 2004, prevention grants averaging \$507 helped a whopping 35,589 households avoid homelessness, state officials report.

Eighty percent of households getting assistance remained in permanent

housing at least six months later, state officials said.

But despite the program's impact, as many as 13,000 households were turned away in 2004 due to insufficient funding, according to the CCH study.

In fall 2004 CCH surveyed the 65 prevention fund providers in Illinois to assess how well the program meets needs. CCH found that 87 percent of providers say they lacked the funds they needed to meet the need in their communities last year.

Throughout Illinois, more than 3,600 requests are made each week for prevention funds, but providers were able to serve less than 40 percent of those seeking help. Seventy-five percent of



applicants were families and the remainder were single adults, including seniors. Most providers told CCH that to meet the need would require at least twice the prevention funding they now receive.

"Most of the people who access Homeless Prevention funds spend over 40 percent of their income to maintain housing," said Joan Schwingen, director of prevention at Heartland Human Care Services, which manages the prevention program in Chicago. "That means that a

crisis such as an illness not covered by sick pay, or uninsured medical costs, or an expensive care repair can result in the need to make choices that may put the family's housing at risk.

"Homeless prevention funds provide a one-time answer that can mean the difference between living in a vulnerable situation and living on the streets."

To end the unmet need in Illinois, CCH has begun to advocate that the state more than double its annual prevention funding, to \$10.7 million a year. This would give providers the resources needed to adequately assist more households in need of emergency help, helping to prevent homelessness before it starts.

Renaissance 2010

Following the dismantling of public housing in Chicago (the "Plan for Transformation") comes the educational equivalent, "Renaissance 2010"—a plan for the closure of 60 to 90 public schools serving primarily the city's poorest children. These schools are to be replaced with new experimental schools, many of which will be privatized. An unprecedented displacement of students (those least able to withstand school mobility) is expected.

Most of the children displaced will be unable to return to the "reborn" Renaissance school. Among those resisting "Ren 2010" are homeless families who have filed a motion to enforce their right to school stability in the *Salazar v. Edwards* case.

Recently, opponents of Ren 2010 have scored significant victories. Chicago Public Schools appear to have scaled back the number of schools slated for closure this year. An estimated "15-18 or more" schools were expected to be closed in June but only four were then announced. This came as the result of very restrictive school closing "guidelines" which CPS issued after tremendous community pressure and significant input from the public.

Proposals selected for creation of Ren 2010 schools (18 total) included no private "contract" schools and a more limited expansion of charter schools than had been expected.

In addition to these adjustments, CPS agreed in the *Salazar* litigation in January 2005, to:



- 1 assess the needs of the 203 currently identified homeless children affected by the June, 2004 school closures, make recommendations for support services needed, and deliver those services in an effort to limit the harmful effects of having forced these children out of their home schools
- 2 require that all new schools abide by the legal requirements and Board Policy pertaining to the educational rights of homeless children

- 3 allow homeless children access and transportation to any new Ren 2010 school
- 4 provide assistance to the 28 (or more) homeless children who will be displaced from Bunche,

Howland and Grant Elementary schools this June. Settlement talks, facilitated by the Judge, are currently in progress.

Significantly, many of the structural components of Ren 2010 are disintegrating. Key leaders for CPS have left or are leaving, legal counsel for the Board is being replaced and the amount of money allocated for the "new" schools seems disappointing to the proponents and uncertain in the long run (see *Chicago Tribune*, 3/1/05 editorial "Loving Schools to Death.>").



Find us on the Web at: www.chicagohomeless.org

A Newsletter for People Concerned with Homelessness in Chicago

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DATED MATERIAL

Hubert Sumlin, blues legend and longtime guitarist for blues pioneer Howlin' Wolf, playing at the 14th Annual Hopefest Benefit Concert at the Park West in Chicago on Saturday, February 12, 2005



Photo by Diane Durkin

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