



LOT BY



Stories from the Steel City's Land Stewards

By Grounded Strategies, Illustrated and designed by Trenita Finney

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grounded believes investing in vacant lots and the people who maintain them improves neighborhood health and community resiliency. Most people don't realize that a vacant lot isn't actually vacant. Each vacant lot is filled with memories, stories, hope, and intentions of the community that has continued to maintain and care for it.

This book is a celebration of the people who have invested their labor and love into Pittsburgh's vacant lots. We share these stories to inspire. In these pages, you'll hear from stewards who have activated vacant lots to create access to fresh food, provide small business opportunities, reflect the beauty of the neighborhood, build community, and heal and inspire.

We hope that the next time you walk by a vacant lot you see it not as empty, but as a place that is important to someone and worthy of investment. We must continue to invest in vacant lot stewardship across our city, improving Pittsburgh **LOT BY LOT**.

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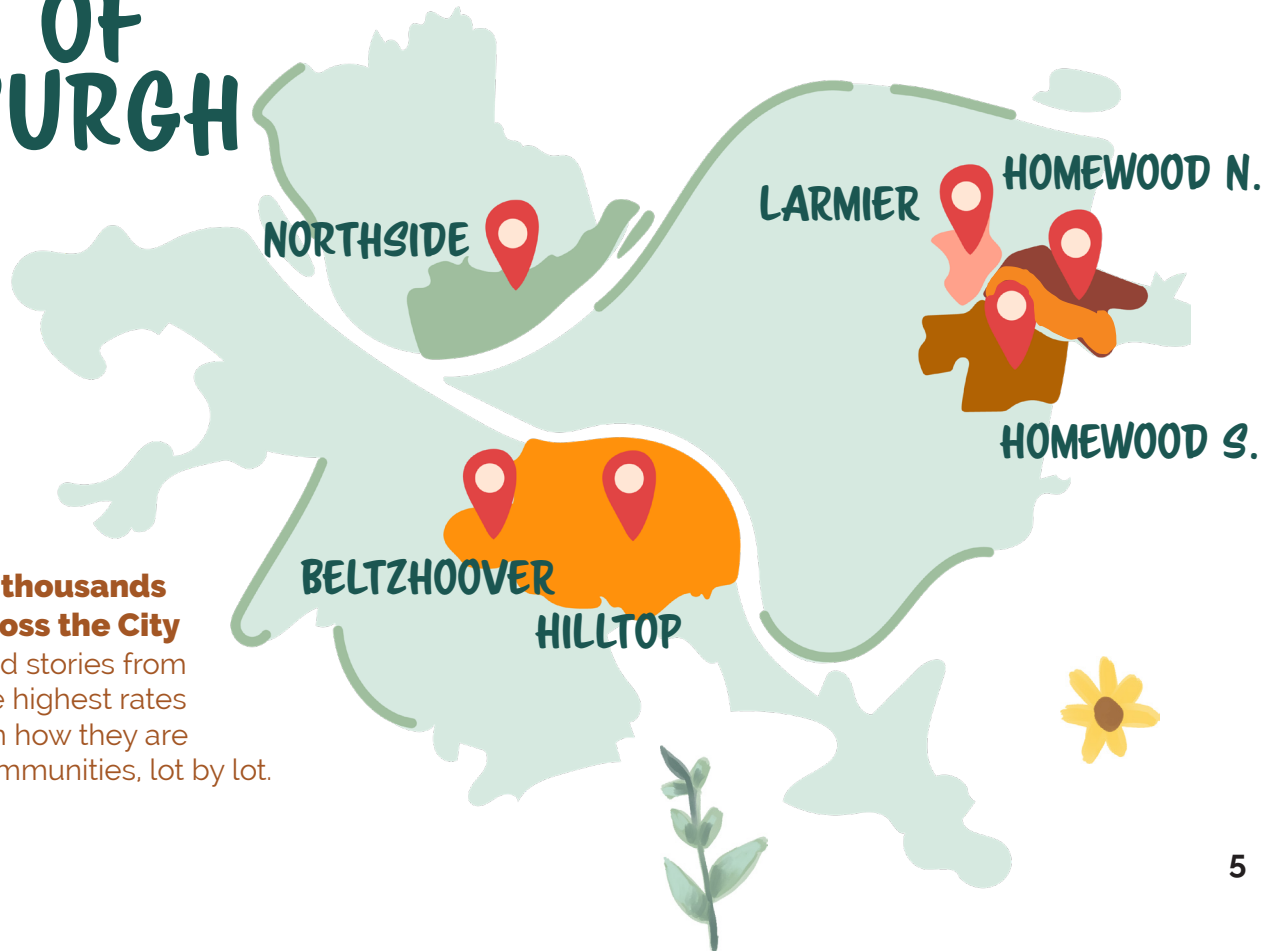
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CITY OF PITTSBURGH



There are tens of thousands of vacant lots across the City of Pittsburgh. Read stories from neighbors facing the highest rates of vacancy and learn how they are transforming their communities, lot by lot.



Lisa Freeman

Freeman Family Farms

I am a proud Black woman. I have one desire in life, and that desire is to live in peace. My quality of life; there's a certain way I want to live. I don't want to live in filth, I don't want things unsightly in front of my property or in back of my property. I take pride that little children — Black, brown, white — can look at me and say, "Ms. Lisa says what she means and means what she says in word and in deed." That makes me proud.

How do I keep going? I have children who are still growing up in this neighborhood. I have children who walk by my house everyday that reach in and take those free books, free socks, free pampers, free milk, whatever I put in there because that matters to me. Building up a community — that matters to me. Bringing up a community that cares for one another — that matters to me. To speak out when I see something wrong, that matters to me. We all have a voice, we all have a responsibility, we all have a right to say — this is not right. That means something to me.



"I TAKE PRIDE THAT LITTLE CHILDREN — BLACK, BROWN, WHITE — CAN LOOK AT ME AND SAY, MS. LISA SAYS WHAT SHE MEANS AND MEANS WHAT SHE SAYS IN WORD AND IN DEED. THAT MAKES ME PROUD."

Jmar Bey

Hilltop Men's Group

We decided one day that we had to turn these vacant lots from eyesores into assets. And I started saying that as my mantra, from eyesores to assets. So we just started cleaning up the lots and doing things. Low and behold, some opportunities came along to join this program: the LandCare program. We got involved with that and soon after, we actually started getting paid to clean up, cut, and maintain vacant lots. We were really invested and understood that there is value in these lots, even if no one is trying to buy these lots, we value them as a community. These lots represent opportunities. There are opportunities to beautify these vacant lots. There are opportunities to grow and produce food in these lots, to make art in these lots, the list goes on and on and on.

Whenever you come from a hopeless perspective and think that the neighborhood is dilapidated and there's a lot of violence, it can be hard to envision those types of things. You wouldn't think that cleaning up a vacant lot would be catalytic in reversing hopelessness but it can. It can be a start. It can really perpetuate people wanting to improve the lot next to it, the house next to it, and then the community as a whole. It becomes infectious. We can hold people accountable and start to get things taken care of.



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UP A VACANT LOT WOULD BE CATALYTIC
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Beverly Howell (Grandma Bev)

CommunityCare Homewood

I am so aware that I live in Homewood on Upland Street. I see trash and I say inside my head, "it doesn't have to be like this." I'm Black. I've raised all my kids up, and I own property. Now I talk to the young kids on the block about picking up their neighborhood. And it can be done because I do it. As you walk down the street, you take a bag and you pick up the trash and now you've just picked up our home. Now you can smile for the day.

Charmaine McDonald

CommunityCare Homewood

I remember how the lots were before they were empty. There were buildings and stores and different things. When the homes and the stores disappeared, they became empty lots. I didn't see the beauty anymore because the empty lots became filled with trash. Instead of complaining about how it looked, I took it upon myself to make it better, which meant cleaning the lots.

And I hoped through the years of me cleaning up these lots that the community would see that there are people left who still care about the lots and the neighbors around them. I clean to let people know when they walk past that someone cares about them and what they see and how it makes them feel. I want them to take pride in their community. I've been doing it for well over 20 years and I'm not tired yet. Whether it be my block or 5 blocks up or another community. I get satisfaction and joy because I know someone's going to have to walk past that lot and they won't have to walk past the trash.

Khadijah Bey

CommunityCare Homewood

I have been a resident of Homewood for a little over 15 years and I bought a beautiful home in 2005. My home is next to two vacant lots: one belongs to the city and the other to an older man who I believe is deceased. After seeing that these lots were not being taken care of, naturally I knew that I would maintain them because they're next to my home and in my community. Almost 5 years ago, I was approached by Grounded and they explained to me their vision for restoring the neglected vacant lots in Homewood. Grounded told me about the CommunityCare program, where residents of Homewood become volunteers to help clean up trash, cut grass, pull weeds, plant flowers, and restore the forgotten vacant lots in Homewood. It was a yes for me since I have been doing it for years next to my home but to be doing it on a bigger level.

Grounded has really changed my perspective of my neighborhood. I now can see growth, life, beauty, and cleanliness when I walk out my door. I feel my neighborhood is a reflection of who I am, so I try to do my best as a CommunityCare Steward. Along the way, I have met so many awesome people who are also stewards and we became friends and we go out together to beautify our community and we are recognized. I would love to be able to purchase my side lots one day to have a lovely green place for my family and neighbors. It is a blessing that I am able to be a part of the change to reclaim vacant land and make real improvements to the quality of open space. I pray that what I do becomes contagious and more people join in our mission to engage and empower and address environmental injustice through Grounded!



Charmaine McDonald

"AND I HOPED THROUGH THE YEARS OF ME CLEANING UP THESE LOTS THAT **THE COMMUNITY** WOULD SEE THAT THERE ARE PEOPLE LEFT WHO STILL CARE ABOUT THE **LOTS** AND THE NEIGHBORS AROUND THEM"



Beverly Howell



Khadijah Bey

"IT IS A BLESSING THAT I AM ABLE TO BE A PART OF THE CHANGE TO RECLAIM VACANT LAND AND MAKE REAL IMPROVEMENTS TO THE QUALITY OF OPEN SPACE, I PRAY THAT WHAT I DO BECOMES CONTAGIOUS AND MORE **PEOPLE JOIN IN OUR MISSION TO ENGAGE AND EMPOWER AND ADDRESS ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE THROUGH GROUNDED!**"

"NOW I TALK TO THE YOUNG KIDS ON THE BLOCK ABOUT PICKING UP THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD. **AND IT CAN BE DONE BECAUSE I DO IT**"

VACANT LAND SHOULD REFLECT THE BEAUTY OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Gordon Hodnett

Garden on Gearing & Grounded Board Member

The Garden on Gearing was planned as a source of produce and place of peace. The vacant lots are located on a school bus and Port Authority stop, with plenty of benches surrounding it. Over the years the Garden on Gearing has grown from 6 to 11 raised beds, 8 fruit trees, blackberries and raspberries. The deer ate the blueberries, much to the chagrin of the gophers and the people.

I have learned a lot from participating with others, mainly BUGs (Black Urban Gardeners) at their site and other sites, as well as the help from Grow Pittsburgh, Grounded, The Hilltop Farmers, and Soil Sisters. So happy when folks stop by to see what is growing and try something they haven't. I learn something new everyday.

And there is always next year; fencing for the deer.



**"SO HAPPY WHEN FOLKS STOP BY TO SEE
WHAT IS GROWING AND TRY SOMETHING
THEY HAVEN'T."**

VACANT LAND CAN BUILD COMMUNITY

Ms. Betty Lane

African Healing Garden

I started African Healing Garden around 2015. I started it for a couple of reasons. One, I had this property that I wasn't sure what to do with. And two, there was a need for some serious healing within my community. There needs to be some healing space within this neighborhood. So I came across a contractor who was also interested in nature and plants and supporting the community, so we got together to create what has become the African Healing Garden.

I want to tell the future generation to dream big and allow those dreams to manifest. Find your passion and go for it. It may not all fall in place exactly when you want it, but if you keep at it, it will come to pass. Keep your dreams alive!



**"I WANT TO TELL THE FUTURE
GENERATION TO DREAM BIG AND ALLOW
THOSE DREAMS TO MANIFEST. FIND YOUR
PASSION AND GO FOR IT..."**

VACANT LAND CAN HEAL AND INSPIRE A DREAM.

Grounded is calling for the restorative transformation of vacant land across Allegheny County. Here's our vision for Vacant Land Justice:

1. We envision the intentional care of vacant lots.
2. We envision empowering communities with the agency to protect and preserve critical green space on vacant land.
3. We envision land serving the environmental, cultural, health, and restorative justice needs of communities.
4. We envision affordable land for those systematically and historically denied ownership.
5. We envision land reparations and the restorative transformation of vacant land in marginalized communities.
6. We envision public accountability for institutions that contribute to land loss and disenfranchisement in marginalized communities.
7. We envision vacant land serving as a training ground for youth, those facing barriers to employment, and those actively interested in stewarding transition land.
8. We envision the celebration and compensation of caregivers of vacant land.

Visit groundedpgh.org/advocacy

Do you have a story to tell? Use [#Lots2LovePGH](https://twitter.com/Lots2LovePGH) to share how vacant lots are being transformed in your community.

Grounded Strategies

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

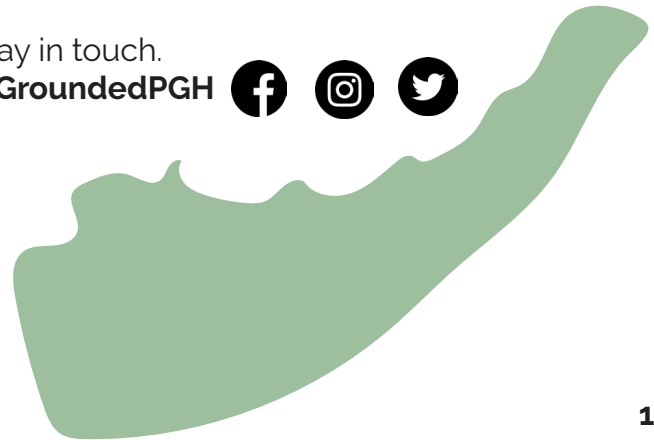
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change rooted in community