



[The Bright Side Episode 18: Blight Be Gone](#)

Produced by
CEDAM

Underwritten by
MSHDA

Kelly Clarke It was a florist. They grew in the greenhouse and this was their offices and retail. So you can see that the property was significantly blighted just a couple years ago. This is an image of the barn that we're standing in right now, and an image of some structures that were on the site.

Mary Balkema When 2008... when the housing market crashed, a lot of people lost a lot of value, and then folks walked away from their houses. So we foreclose on anywhere from 100 to 200 parcels a year, and there's about 30 to 40 that need to come down every single year. So the blight is in Climax this year, it's in Kalamazoo Township, it's in Comstock, it's in Cooper, it's in the city, it's in the township, it's everywhere.

Dayne Walling These have been factory sites for more than 100 years.

Billy Wayne Bradshaw When people, you told them you worked at old Flint Manufacturing, they knew it was a lot of folk. But eventually it just trickled down to nothing. And that's what's so disheartening at the present time.

Mark Wallace The cut when it was unused as a former rail corridor really became sort of an overgrown place for vagrants.

Kelly Clarke And we kept hearing the same thing over and over again. We weren't sure what to do with this site, but we felt like it was important because it was on the Kalamazoo River and it was on the Kalamazoo River Valley Trail.

---Blight Be Gone---

Chevy Commons

Michael Freeman It was called Happy Valley once upon a time.

Billy Wayne Bradshaw Behind me is what was once called Chevrolet Flint Manufacturing. When I hired in in 1957, there were approximately I think somewhere around 6-7,000 people working here at this complex down here at that time.

Ryan Londrigan We're driving through – this would've been the shop floor. Like on this side they're making pistons. On the left side they're making the clutches.

Dayne Walling It was the place where the lumber industry, the carriage industry, the auto industry all started and flourished. It also includes the properties that were the site of the great sit down strike in 1936 and 1937. It's in every U.S. history book in the country, and this is where that took place.

Christina Kelly The original site is about... I think 140 acres, and that includes what is now part of Kettering University. But the 60 acres that the City owns is the section of the site that we're dealing with right now.

Ryan Londrigan The site's obviously highly contaminated. It has a lot of history and issues. Oil in the ground in some places several feet thick, 10 feet thick. So, similar to many cleanups around the country, we're focusing on managing the contamination in place because trying to clean up a site fully is always too expensive. It's too difficult, and often a site like this located on the sensitive Flint River, you can make the conditions worse just by trying to remove the material.

Michael Freeman Once upon a time, while General Motors, these factories that were on the site contributed towards the economic vitality of the county, it did create issues for the neighborhoods. Once thriving neighborhoods became the areas you didn't want to live because of pollution, environmental quality around it, sound, traffic.

Dayne Walling What residents and neighbors and local businesses wanted to see in that area, and the vision of Chevy Commons is what we heard.

Christina Kelly There is an opportunity to cap and green it, so it's like a park-like space that's right on the riverfront and sits between downtown, University of Michigan Flint and Kettering University. So you have a green corridor right in downtown Flint.

Ryan Londrigan There'll be a ten foot wide walking or bicycle path that just makes a loop through the whole property and comes back out. And all this will be grass with areas of bushes and trees and at this end will be a lowland, like a wetland area.

Billy Wayne Bradshaw Even though I no longer live here in Michigan, it's sad to me to see the area the way it is now. It's emotional for me to even think about it and look at it.

Michael Freeman My family actually moved to Flint in 1856 and so we've been Flint residents since, and I personally have a huge interest in seeing this redeveloped. This is my home. There are many people here who are committed to our community and who want to see Flint brought back, and I think Chevy in the Hole is one of the most important projects that will support not only the downtown area, but the neighborhoods surrounding downtown.

Dayne Walling And now, as we transition to a more diverse 21st century economy that's anchored in higher education and healthcare and neighborhoods that are judged by their quality of life instead of how close they are to the factory, we are redesigning this area along the river to a place that really produces natural beauty and health and wellness and enjoyment, and that's the vision for Chevy Commons.

Chevy Commons

Riverview Launch
Kalamazoo County Land Bank

Mary Balkema The first year we foreclosed on the vacant five acres. The next year we foreclosed on the blighted parcel that was the greenhouse. And this year we foreclosed on the garage, which is near the front of the road. Then we had a lot of community input. Should we raze the whole thing and build something new, or could it be saved?

Kelly Clarke We are at 1523 Riverview, the site of a formerly abandoned and vacant property. So you can see from the state of the structures, this was sort of the state of the entire site about a year ago.

One of the early things we did over the last year was restore this barn. And we've been using this as an event space. A local artist created some of these fish sculptures, which are all fish that are native to the river.

We've been incorporating the arts into a lot of our conversations as it relates to vacant spaces. We're working with a local artist, Conrad Kaufman, who designed these beams and posts for us.

You can see we had some volunteers place some benches out here. We were able to salvage wood from some of the trees that were on the site.

Perry Wolfe The refreshing part is not a lot of people knew about this site. So I've had a lot of fun telling people about this site, and when they get there, they're just awestruck with, "My gosh. We've been driving by it and we just never really paid attention."

Mary Balkema The water is always a huge asset, right. And then the trailway is unbelievably popular and is used a whole lot.

Kelly Clarke A lot of folks said, "Gosh. Wouldn't it be great if we could open up those sight lines to the river?" You can see what a difference that's made. If you look down here, you wouldn't even know you were riding or running by the river. And then the area that's been cleared by volunteers really opens up those sight lines.

There are a lot of environmental features at the site. We've worked closely with the Nature Center.

Jenn Wright We've been involved with a few different areas here. One of them is a restoration project: about five and a half acres of restoration and about a half an acre of that is along the Kalamazoo River. We also are doing sort of a whole different scale project, which is a natural playground.

Outdoor experiences in children's lives are really starting to decline. And as a result of that we're seeing an increase in child obesity, we're seeing increases of attention deficit disorder. We basically did some evaluations and said, "Wouldn't it be cool if we could create safe spaces for kids?"

So Riverview Launch is hoping to do that here on this site, and they've actually started a small one already, which is exciting, with some logs and some rocks.

Kelly Clarke So we had approached Trybal Revival Gardens and asked if they would like to do something on the site early on, and they were interested in bees.

Dale Abbott This is a native bee condo, and it's a structure for native bees, mostly Mason bees in our area. They nest in these little tubes, and we've got a variety of tubes from different plant material that have hollow stems.

Tomme Maile You can see a lot of them if you get up close are sealed with some kind of a mud-like substance. And that means somebody's home.

Dale So probably every two years we'll turn this. This is a cube that spins on a spindle. They'll emerge out of the holes in the back, and then when they come out they'll find the new nesting materials.

Tomme So all of this stuff, after they go through their two year cycle, will be thrown away to prevent disease.

Kelly Clarke The reason why there is so much creativity here is because we presented the parcel to the community and we really invited a lot of folks to participate and come up with the ideas.

We've had probably 150-200 volunteers doing everything from rolling sod to planting flowers to painting murals, painting the barn.

Dale Abbott This is going to be such a fabulous connector to downtown, to the Nature Center, Spring Valley Park, this is just going to be a gem in our community's landscape.

Tomme Maile We've done a lot of volunteer work out here and other places for the land bank.

Perry Wolfe And we as a community have come together to try and redevelop this orphaned site into something really beautiful. It's going to be something we all can be proud of.

Riverview Launch
RiverviewLaunch.com

Dequindre Cut
Detroit Riverfront Conservancy

Mark Wallace So the Dequindre Cut sits right on Atwater Street, right off the Detroit River. It runs from Atwater Street all the way up to Gratiot Avenue, and we're currently working on an extension that will take it all the way to MAC Avenue.

It's a former rail line from the Grand Trunk Western Rail Line, and trains used to come right down here. It sits right at the entrance to the Detroit River with the dry docks. So freighters used to come in, unload their cargo, and put it right onto trains and send the trains up and distribute those goods and those materials all over the country and all over the state.

The Cut when it was unused as a former rail corridor really became sort of an overgrown place for vagrants, and there were a couple people who were sort of living there and doing bad things. So we've taken that, decommissioned the rail line, and turned it into a wonderful walking path and a biking path. And it's really become a great spot in the city. It's sunken underground, so you can have a good feel of this peaceful experience within the context of a very vibrant and active city.

So the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy is responsible for all of the management and maintenance and programming associated with the Dequindre Cut. So one of the things we take very seriously – obviously being in Detroit and an urban area, any urban area – you're going to need to make sure safety is at a high level. We provide call boxes and security cameras on the Dequindre Cut to make sure that people feel comfortable. If an issue does happen, we have security, which is on bikes or on vehicles, who can respond very quickly as well.

People really love the Dequindre Cut. And it's like the RiverWalk, where people have a real sense of ownership of the space. Whether it's Lafayette Park residents, whether it's kids who are coming down to university preparatory academy for their high school experience, it really is a place where people feel like they belong, and they do. And people feel a sense of ownership, which is absolutely valid. Everyone owns the Dequindre Cut. Everyone owns the Detroit RiverWalk, and it's great to have those two places connected in such a vital way.

The RiverWalk has always been envisioned as a connector to a much larger greenways link, and the Dequindre Cut is one of those critical spokes. So we'll really be on a circuit for bikers, pedestrians, people exercising, and people who just sort of want to get away from the everyday hustle and bustle of the city.

We're very excited in 2015 that the construction will extend the Dequindre Cut from 1.5 miles to 2 miles. It'll take it from Gratiot Avenue all the way up to MAC Avenue, and that pathway will actually take you up to grade. So you'll hit the neighborhoods at MAC and you'll also be able to connect directly to Eastern Market, which is one of my favorite parts of the city. So it'll take you from the riverfront all the way to Eastern Market. And to be able to connect that directly to the Riverfront Conservancy and the RiverWalk is really a great thing.

Dequindre Cut
DetroitRiverfront.org

VACANT Lansing

Jamie Schriener-Hooper VACANT is... I guess it's an event. We hold different events in vacant spaces. People buy a ticket to the event and they don't know what they're buying a ticket for. We will send them email clues after they buy a ticket, but they have no idea really what the event is. And they also don't know where the event is actually being held, and then we also give back at least half of the profits – but as much as we can – to a neighborhood based nonprofit where we hold the event.

It's a group of us who are all volunteers. No one gets paid. All of us pitched in money to create a seed pot to get started with it, and then we just hold these special events in the community trying to show people what a space could be.

And it all came about. Suban Nur Cooley, this was her idea.

Suban Nur Cooley I am the founder. So I am the one who came up with the crazy idea in the first place. And I thought, well, what happens while people are trying to fill a space? They just sit there. So it would be amazing to kind of showcase what could be in a space.

Jamie VACANT 4 was Bourbon & Bingo. And it kind of evolved from a number of people throwing ideas out there. We had a little act, kind of a little show in between, where we had a couple of different musicians play. We had a comedian. We dressed up the building in kind of a Florida type theme, and some of the clues that were sent out alluded to a 1960's Miami style theme. And it was just... it was a lot of fun.

Kate's Vintage Café provided the food. Ryan Wert, who is a big part of the REO Town Commercial Association, he started working with us on the committee this time, and he was just absolutely phenomenal. We were able to tie in a lot of REO Town people.

Suban Okay, so the original tagline for VACANT Lansing was, "Vacant spaces, vacant minds," just as a concept. That's how it began. You have a vacant space. There are so many ways to envision what could go in there. So why not have people's minds racing a little bit longer? Have them dream new ways that they envision the space being used. And then have them experience something they may or may not have expected. We give them clues. When you buy a ticket you get clues, you know, up through until the day, but we like to keep them suspenseful. Just to add some intrigue.

Most people know what they're doing on a Friday night. It's kind of fun to not know what you're doing.

Foreclosure Prevention
Michigan Foreclosure Prevention Corps

Rachel Diskin One way to prevent blight is by helping to stop foreclosures. The Michigan Foreclosure Prevention Corps has 20 AmeriCorps members serving across the state of Michigan to help people at risk of losing their homes to foreclosure.

Crystal Elissetche I am part of the Michigan Foreclosure Prevention Corps. This is my second year, so I've expanded upon my service. But the first year was intake and triage, which is a fancy way for saying you're the first point of contact for a lot of vulnerable homeowners. So homeowners, usually when they're facing foreclosure, are very distraught. They don't know what resources are out there.

Michael McAuliffe I just advise people and let them know how the foreclosure process works. It's kind of confusing. There are a lot of weird legal rules about it. So that's been great. I've also been able to point people in the direction to get funding that they wouldn't have known was out there.

Angela Burge At Center for Financial Health I work with clients regarding homebuyer education and also foreclosure prevention. So we help clients on both ends of the spectrum.

Michelle Lee Most recently we had two clients who were behind in their mortgages 3-4 months, so in those situations they're close to eviction. And we were able to pull their files together, get them submitted to Step Forward. However, through the counseling and consultation, before Step Forward even came in we were able to get them modified through their mortgage so that they could keep their homes.

Linda Chavous If we didn't have the Foreclosure Prevention program, we would have a lot of people that would have lost their property.

Michael McAuliffe And the best part is being able to keep people in their home. To me homes are the most important thing. It's kind of the starting point for someone to have a well balanced life.

Dan Lakin Personally and professionally, knowing your way around homeownership is invaluable. It's great that I can help people understand it, and it's also great that in my own life I will... no one's going to get a predatory loan on me!

Linda Chavous Every time I go to an AmeriCorps training and around other agencies and different individuals I met, I get a well that is full of resources, knowledge, ways to do things, and kind of brainstorm and be able to talk about it.

Michelle Lee The professional development has been just wonderful. The courses, certifications, and information has been phenomenal. I really hadn't expected that, to be honest.

Kadeja Roberts I'm also doing a lot of different conferences that I probably would have never went to. Passing the Leadership Baton, Women Empowerment, I go to Kentucky for a big conference with NeighborWorks. So it's really exciting.

Crystal Elissetche I can't explain the shift that has come with AmeriCorps. I think when you work in direct service you learn so much about yourself. You learn how to prioritize, and you learn how to prioritize while being empathetic.

MI Foreclosure Prevention Corps
foreclosure.cedam.info/mfpc

Michigan Vacant Property Campaign

The Michigan Vacant Property Campaign works with leaders in the state who are committed to turning the vacant properties in their communities into assets. The MVPC is a working collaboration of four organizations with unique expertise related to vacant property issues. Created to develop a statewide network of practice and expertise, the MVPC assists small, rural, suburban and metropolitan areas. The MVPC's core activities are to provide education and outreach, community and partner technical assistance, local campaign formation, and policy and systems development.

The Campaign website also provides access to data and resources such as the Michigan Community Foreclosure Response Toolkit and Detroit Vacant Properties Toolbox.

For more on all of these tools, visit michiganvacantproperty.org.

Mary Balkema When we pick a very targeted approach, you can really, really see the benefit.

Michael Freeman So we're very excited about the potential because we believe that this is the key to actually actualizing all of the space around the river, so neighborhoods can be brought back.

Christina Kelly Because we feel it will play a really important role in revitalizing this area. That's why the Genesee County Land Bank is involved as a partner.

Dayne Walling Everyone wanted it to be a recreational space, not something that was fenced off for a few workers only, but was something that was open to the entire community.

Mark Wallace And that's what's great about the space. It's such a flexible, wonderful place that it really works in a lot of different ways for a lot of different people.

Kelly Clarke Working with abandoned and vacant parcels can be challenging, and figuring out how to repurpose them is a difficult and challenging task. I think one of the things we know is we don't have all the answers. But we've also discovered with some of these places they really provide unique opportunities to bring the community together.

Perry Wolfe This isn't the last project that's going to make it a great town, but this is the kind of project everyone needs to adopt and to be part of to continue to make this a great town.

BrightSideTV.com

Outtakes

Dale Abbott We hatched this design ourselves. It's never been tried before. We sent it off to the Xerces Society and they gave us a thumbs up on it and said they thought it was a great idea. So we're going to keep an eye on it and see how it works.

Billy Wayne Bradshaw When I was assigned to Plant 2, I was in the crank department. Weighing 155 pounds and the cranks weighted 85 pounds in the rough.

Ryan Londrigan ...help stabilize the underground conditions. Prevents groundwater movement. Kind of like how we are prevented from moving here. I don't know if I can get through up here.

Olivia Courant You've got a rainbow over your face. You have a rainbow right here.

Michael Freeman That would be me. I'm so happy! [laughs]

---Credits---

Producer

CEDAM

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MSHDA

Music

Josh Woodward – “Morning Blue,” “The Handyman’s Lament,” “Bags of Water,”

“Electric Sunrise” (joshwoodward.com)

Zero-project – “The little demon’s lullaby”

Keffy Kay – “Everyone”

The Black Parrot – “Something a Little Different”

Tyler Vander Maas – “The Bright Side Theme”

Chevy Commons

Historic photos collected by Gerry Godin: buickcity.blogspot.com

1936 footage of car assembly at the Chevrolet Plant in Flint, MI (original source unknown)

Site plan available at Genesee County Land Bank thelandbank.org

Riverview Launch

Still photos by Kalamazoo County Land Bank

Dequindre Cut

Still photos by Detroit Riverfront Conservancy

VACANT Lansing

Video provided by VACANT Lansing

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