

ENCIRCLED: TRACING RINGS ON S. STREET

The shape of S. Street's story is invariably a round one. Like annual rings that radiate concentrically from the stump of a fallen tree, the growth rings of a community are imprinted through a pressurized layering of the internal and external forces that hem it in. These varied impressions reveal crucial clues about growth, health, access, deprivation, and resilience. Each ring—and each year—stretches to contain the story being inscribed within it.

It would be easy to overlook S. Street, to write it off in its current state as just another casualty of time and neglect. But the residents of S. Street remembered something else: all the years that the house was a beautiful fixture of their block.

After the owner's death, the house fell into disrepair and the location eventually became a hub for criminal activity, and the usual rhythms of neighborliness, peace, and safety on the street were interrupted. This sudden loss of stability wasn't business as usual—it was a tragedy of sorts. The end of something they once regarded with pride.

Hovering below the surface of these startling changes are vast root systems that hold the burdens of addiction, poverty, homelessness, mental illness, racial inequity, isolation, and fear firmly in place. The power of these burdens compound over time and often undergird most instances of circumstantial crime. Everything connects to what grows underground.

Above ground, the residents of S. Street were disturbed and frightened by the activities happening at this property. Used needles and baggies riddled the sidewalks, and there were multiple incidents reported of squatters siphoning water from other homes. Over the course of the year, a fire would eventually break out, endangering the surrounding properties and leaving the structure itself virtually unsalvageable.

It exhausted residents to remain constantly vigilant, to never know what might happen only steps from their front doors, to never feel completely safe inside their own homes. They were ready to take the street back.

It is crucial to mention that Act didn't find S. Street; S. Street found us. "We heard about you," Mr. C. said over the phone. "We've heard about what you've done. Can you give us a hand?" After being referred by our former clients, we signed Mr. C. and a few of his neighbors as clients alongside our legal team partners from Brown Fox. And so began a year-long endeavor to take back S. Street.

S. Street clients shared a long chronicled history of the property—videos, documented complaints, requests to the police and city Code, and detailed notes of incidents they witnessed. City officials responded with cooperation, support, and regular response in partnership with residents and members of the legal team.

A look back on a year in the life of one South Dallas street through the lenses of transition, mutuality, and the forging of radical connection.

After the fire, the house became irredeemable from the City's perspective. But the squatters continued to use the building and the adjacent shed. The legal process with the property owners involved several heirs and took a great deal of time and resources to resolve. We explained that they were still responsible for the property and asked them what they planned to do about the activity. They expressed the desire to demolish the remaining structure but lacked the funds to see it through, so Act engaged the City to step in and facilitate the process.

On demolition day, S. Street residents, Act field staff, and members of the Brown Fox legal team gathered to watch the hopes of their efforts realized.

"I'm just happy to see this structure taken down," said Mr. C. "It has been nothing positive—just a place of drug use. The future—it's going to be good."

"It's very satisfying to see the fruition of about a year of work," reflected Scott Self, an attorney from Brown Fox's legal team. "At the end of the day our goals are based on what our clients want, and so to hear how happy and satisfied our clients are is very gratifying.

"A faithful presence. That's what Act wants to be in the lives of residents," says Dawn, Act's Vice President of Field Operations. "Asking and serving. We get a front row seat to see how residents encourage and motivate one another—how they work and contribute what they can. Act motivates relationships toward partnership. We are a small piece in all of this."

The lot where the house on S. Street once stood is now clear—clear but not empty. The years radiate in rings around it, marking every season. A ring for each of the many years it stood as a life-giving fixture of the community. A ring for each year of decline and difficulty. And a final revolution for the year that the residents of S. Street advocated for the future of their neighborhood—and won.

The people and entities that came together on S. Street's behalf form their own widening circles: from the referring neighborhood association, to S. Street residents. From Act field teams to the attorneys of Brown Fox. From the City of Dallas to the heirs of the property, to our faithful donors.

The story of S. Street expands our awareness that all flourishing—physical, relational, and spiritual—depends on the formation of creative networks of mutuality. These layers of partnership build on one another, ever expanding Act's ability to be a faithful presence in Dallas' underserved communities and reminding us that everything—absolutely everything—is connected.