

# Their dream: Make something of nothing

**E**zra Johnson shook his head. Every homeowner knows the feeling.

"The plumber hasn't come," he said. "And the roofing man, neither."

But Johnson needed these housecalls more than most.

"We don't have any plumbing right now," he said. "And we'll need a roof pretty soon, too."

Not to mention other household items: floors, walls, a furnace, electrical wiring and a few of those handy glass panes that keep the wind and rain outside.

"But this our home," he said. "This is our dream house."

Ezra and Vernell Johnson's dream is a burned-out brownstone at 6438 S. Eberhart. They had bought it for \$0.00, which was a fair asking price.

Now they planned to make something of it.

"You see all the politicians running around these days," Ezra said. "They're all hollering, 'We're for the people!'"

"I'm not sure which people they mean—certainly not the poor people or people without good homes."

"I think *we're* the ones who have to care about us."

Chicago has a problem housing the poor, as you may have noticed. And there are many complex solutions being tried.

But the Johnsons and a few others have found a simpler two-step approach:

I understand that there are thousands of poor people looking

for homes in the city—and thousands of abandoned homes looking for people.

2. So find one, move in and get to work.

"When we finish the first floor, we're planning a three-day housewarming party," Ezra said.

A group called ACORN—Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now—is serving

as real-estate agent for the Johnsons and 25 others so far.

"We look for the right houses and then beg, plead, get down on our knees to get the deeds," said Chris Brown, an ACORN staff member.

"The owner who abandoned this house, for example—he finally realized it was either hand over the deed or pay the city to knock it down."

And now a South Side neighborhood heard the fresh new sounds of power saws and hammers. Today was dry-wall day at the Johnson house. There were floors to put in, too.

The workmen were charging \$0.00 an hour.

"We helped the others work on their places," Vernell said. "Now we've got ours—and here they are."

"We just help each other out. It's like everybody getting together and putting up a barn in the pioneer days."

Ezra, 28, who is looking for work, and Vernell, 26, who works in accounting, know this much: They hardly dared dream of owning a home until now.



SUN-TIMES/Bob Ringham

Ezra and Vernell Johnson sand walls in the burned-out brownstone they are rehabbing.

"We pay our bills but we're not what you'd call bankable," Vernell said. "But at zero dollars, the price was right."

"So now we simply put our rent money into this place—plus more work than you can imagine."

There was a sudden hubbub outside. Visitors had arrived on

the front steps.

Others were interested in the dream, too.

The Johnsons offered a warm welcome. Henry Carter, a retired contractor who serves as roving expert for squatter rehab, wasn't so sure.

He shouted this warning over

the power saw:

"If you decide to do this, I'll show you what you need to know! But it's work—a lot of work!"

"And it's got to be done right! You'll need a licensed electrician for the wiring—and you'd better check in with me for all the work you do on your own!"

"Because if you put something in wrong, I'll just make you take it back out again!"

Vernell Gibson, 62, smiled to herself. Carter didn't scare her. She knew life's truth: Nothing good comes easy.

"I'm rentin' a place now that's all in a tangle, no heat, just awful," she said. "I'll do whatever it takes to get me a home."

"And I'm gonna start lookin' tomorrow. You just watch me."

Now I've talked in my time with neighborhood groups and experts and politicians. They tell me how complicated and impossible this housing business is.

And they're probably right.

"You can't just go around taking over places," one neighborhood leader told me this week. "Improving the neighborhoods is a slow, hard grind. There are so many factors to consider."

"I mean, these people really don't know what they're doing."

But then I met the Johnsons.

And I watched Vernell Gibson's eyes light like fire as she headed out to look for her dream house: nothing fancy, understand, just two bedrooms, burned out and boarded up, with rats in the basement and gangs on the stoop.

And I began to think maybe this city could use a few more people who don't know what they're doing.

## What else does ACORN do?

A typical month might find ACORN neighborhood groups in Miami and Pittsburgh winning jobs on downtown development projects for the unemployed, groups in New Orleans and Boston fighting to stop the high incidence of rapes in their communities, and groups in St. Paul and Washington, D.C. campaigning to remove lead poisoned soil from neighborhood

playgrounds and flaking asbestos from neighborhood schools.

ACORN's membership of 75,000 black, white, and latino families across 26 states invests countless volunteer hours working on issues that are critical to the survival of their low income neighborhoods—and to the future of America.