

From 'broom closet' to an arts hub

South Loop's FAME Center looks to expand its footprint and its programming to ensure all of Chicago's kids have access to music education. **Life+Travel**



BRIAN CASSELLA/
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM



Brooklyn, Illinois, residents Amir Watson, right, and Promise Houston ride bikes on Madison Street in November. Brooklyn is thought to be the first majority-Black town in America to incorporate. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

State EPA rebuilding under Pritzker

Still, can new blood, money offset Trump's proposed rollbacks?

By Michael Hawthorne
Chicago Tribune

As the new top environment cop in Illinois, James Jennings knew coming in his job would be challenging no matter who won the presidential election.

The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency is rebuilding under Democratic Gov. JB Pritzker after more than a decade spent shedding inspectors, slowing the policing of air and water pollution and feuding with the state attorney general's office.

During the past two years alone, the agency added 261 new employees, according to state records. Its budget rose to \$871 million in 2024, nearly double the amount spent in 2020.



But it is unclear if new blood and more money can offset Republican President-elect Donald Trump's promised rollbacks of federal environmental protections. Trump also vows to dismantle the U.S. EPA, which in recent years led most of the major cases against Illinois polluters.

"Things will be different than how we currently work with the federal government," Jennings, the new Illinois EPA director, said in a recent interview with the Chicago Tribune. "Our priorities ... are going to be the same."

Topping Jennings' agenda is expanding the state's efforts to slow climate change, taking more aggressive action to protect Illinoisans from toxic forever chemicals, speeding up the removal of brain-damaging lead pipes and addressing environmental justice concerns.

He acknowledged the agency needs to build trust throughout the state — a tough assignment when some believe it is too tough on businesses and others repeatedly document weak enforcement of environmental laws.

"Those of us of a certain age recall the (U.S.) EPA was the

Turn to EPA, Page 10

THE DRIVE TO REVIVE BROOKLYN

By Jonathan Bullington
Chicago Tribune

You may never have heard of Brooklyn, Illinois. You might not be aware it's one of the country's first Black settlements, or that it's thought to be the first majority-Black town in America to incorporate and the oldest such town still in existence today.

You also probably don't know that it's dying.

Established in the early 1830s as a refuge for free and enslaved Black people and incorporated in 1873, Brooklyn is nestled on the eastern bank of the Mississippi River across from St. Louis. It was once a key outpost on the Underground Railroad and, later, a welcoming beacon for those fleeing the Jim Crow South.

It was a thriving, close-knit community where, at its peak, more than 2,500 lived under the town motto: "Founded by Chance, Sustained by Courage."

America's oldest Black town is in Illinois — and it's dying. But the fight has begun to save it



Jewell Wells and Prince Wells Jr., left, during a night at The Harlem Club in Brooklyn in the early 1950s with their relatives and friends James Joor, Beatrice Hill, Prentice Hunter and Leatrice Bradley. **WELLS FAMILY PHOTO**

In the last 70 years, though, Brooklyn has spiraled toward extinction. Nearby factories that once employed Brooklynites have long since vanished. Railroad companies whose tracks encircle Brooklyn have, in previous decades, gobbled up swaths of land, displacing residents and shrinking the usable footprint of a village that has about a dozen streets, none with stoplights.

A small but vibrant commercial district disappeared. In its place came strip clubs, adult bookstores and seedy massage parlors that, along with government corruption scandals and a deadly Wild West-style gunfight involving the town's then-police chief, fueled Brooklyn's past notoriety as a dangerous den of vice.

Today, Brooklyn's population has dwindled to around 650. About a third meet the federal definition of impoverished. Roughly 60% of

Turn to Brooklyn, Page 6

Americans pay respects to Carter

Mourners in Georgia bid farewell to 'amazing man,' 39th president

By Bill Barrow, Jeff Amy and Kate Payne
Associated Press

ATLANTA — Jimmy Carter's extended public farewell began Saturday in Georgia, with the 39th U.S. president's flag-draped casket tracing his long arc from the Depression-era South and family farming business to the pinnacle of American political power and

decades as a global humanitarian.

Those chapters shone throughout the opening stanza of a six-day state funeral intended to blend personalized memorials with the ceremonial pomp afforded to former presidents. The longest-lived U.S. executive, Carter died Dec. 29 at the age of 100.

"He was an amazing man. He was held up and propped up and soothed by an amazing woman," son James Earl "Chip" Carter III, told mourners late Saturday afternoon at the Carter Center, referring to his father and former first lady Rosalynn Carter, who died in

INSIDE: Chicagoland supporters remember Carter's 1978 visit to the North Shore. **Page 4**

■ Carter visited the area often in the 1970s and 1980s. A look back in photos. **Vintage Chicago Tribune in Opinion, Page 4**

2023. "The two of them together changed the world."

Grandson Jason Carter, who now chairs the center's governing board, said, "It's amazing what you can cram into a hundred years."

Turn to Carter, Page 4



A military team carries the casket of former President Jimmy Carter into the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum to lie in repose in Atlanta on Saturday. Carter died Dec. 29 at the age of 100. **BRYNN ANDERSON/AP**



What's next for the Bears?

Caleb Williams has flashed enough to give the Bears hope. But, boy, did they botch his rookie season, writes the Tribune's Brad Biggs. Plus, a look at what players want in the team's next coach. **Chicago Sports**

Signs of trouble ahead for House speaker

While Mike Johnson avoided the dayslong ordeal that his predecessor endured to become speaker, he faces pressure to pass President-elect Donald Trump's agenda. **Nation & World**

TODAY'S WEATHER



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Founder and executive director Sheila Fortson sits on the stage of their new auditorium, Dec. 11 at the FAME Center in the South Loop. BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

LIFE

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BALANCING ACT

Happiness, hope and some hurdles

Here are 24 things from 2024 that I'm carrying into the new year, writes Heidi Stevens

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Chicago Tribune #1

LIFE

FROM A 'BROOM CLOSET' TO AN ARTS HUB

South Loop's FAME Center seeks to expand its footprint and its arts programming for kids in the city

By Shanzeh Ahmad
Chicago Tribune

South Loop's FAME Center started in 2018 in what founder Sheila Fortson called "a broom closet" with just a few students and a piano. The nonprofit is now looking to become a major music and arts education landmark in Chicago with the purchase of a 56,000-square-foot historic building.

Matthew Thomas, 14, remembers that when he first began taking lessons, FAME Center was renting that tiny space at Daystar, a private school in the South Loop. Seeing how far the center has come since then is exciting, he said.

Matthew said he's been taking weekly piano lessons for about six years, which has allowed him to have "really picked up my piano skills and my love for music."

"I've stayed at FAME because Ms. Sheila made me feel welcome in her company and she's always there for me," Matthew said of Fortson, who is also the executive director of FAME, the Fortson Arts and Music Education Center. "Her teaching was also excelling me in piano and even other things outside of piano."

About three years ago, FAME began renting space at its current location at 1319 S. State St. after an expansion at Daystar made space there unavailable. The large State Street brick building is owned by a church and went up for sale in March. Fortson said the FAME team didn't want to move again and decided it would be better to buy the entire building and create what would be called The South Loop Center for the Arts.

"Our goal is to make this purchase," Fortson said. "We're under contract now and hoping to close on the building in April."

The team is deep into fundraising but still needs another \$3 million to \$5 million to cover the purchase price of the building. The cost of the building is about \$7 million, and remodeling, permit and inspection costs and more bring the total to over \$12.5 million for the project. Fortson said they hope to secure a city grant, part of which would go toward the purchase.

FAME is a multidisciplinary nonprofit that focuses on art and music education and making that education accessible to young people in Chicago's underresourced communities, Fortson said. The center provides programming in music, visual art, theater, creative writing and art therapy. It has about 100 participants right now, most of them around 4 to 14 years old.

The location also serves students from the South and West sides and elsewhere around the city, Fortson said.

"We're right in the heart of Chicago, and we want to stay here because we want to give families easy access to us and to these opportunities to learn and grow," Fortson said. "We want students who don't think that they have a place or belong downtown to come and experience the joy of music and art and theater."

Mikayla Davis, 13, takes violin lessons once a week and does art therapy virtually through FAME once a week. She has been doing art therapy for about five years since the death of her father.

"FAME has helped me through the process of grief, and it's helped me a lot throughout life," Davis said.

Mikayla's mother, Monica



Teacher Michelle Brooks works with Matthew Thomas, 14, during his piano lesson Dec. 11 at the FAME Center in the South Loop.
BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS



Founder Sheila Fortson watches Thomas begin his piano lesson Dec. 11.



Thomas prepares for his piano lesson on Dec. 11.

Brown, said her daughter is "extremely artistic and gifted" and that FAME and Fortson helped the teen stay enthusiastic about the arts even after their loss.

"I think about all those other children that go through trauma and just having a different type of therapy that most people don't even realize exists," Brown said. "FAME has allowed her a place to put those feelings in an impactful and positive way, and now more and more kids will get the same thing."

Mikayla said she likes music and art equally and is excited to have more space and more programming available to her. She is interested in learning guitar, she said.

"Music allows me to express myself just like drawing," she said. "It's kind of like your personal diary."

Serving about 1,500 students year-round, FAME Center also offers summer and spring break camps. Fortson said there are students on waitlists for

some of the programs.

"I see the changes that are happening in our kids every day," she said. "I see the hope in their eyes and the excitement when they realize they're really good at something and then as they grow in that skillset."

Students who are able to pay for lessons or classes are charged a fee, while those unable to pay get scholarships, Fortson said.

Fortson was a piano, vocals and violin teacher before starting the nonprofit. Having worked with many students, she realized that not all kids get the same opportunities, especially as arts programming is sometimes cut in public schools.

"It's extremely important to me that arts education is available and accessible to all (Chicago) students," Fortson said. "Every kid is born with creativity inside of them, whether that comes out in math and science or in music and art, but what's lacking is the opportunity to understand and develop their special skills and gifts they

an effect on youth from all over Chicago by creating "a very nurturing, warm environment for kids to come and find their interests and passions in the arts and in music."

"I think that what she's doing with these young people helps them to have confidence and develop their self-esteem so they can have really strong connections with the outside world, and I look forward to helping her with her vision," Dowell said.

Matthew said the center is like a second home for him and "a place where I can just be myself with my teachers, learn how to play piano and just let music calm me down."

He said he is excited for the opportunities other young people like him will have.

"FAME helped me out a lot when I was younger," Matthew said, "and seeing that other people are going to start coming to FAME and it's going to be open to more people makes me excited because more kids get the same experiences that I had."

Meosha Maxwell, Matthew's mother, said FAME offered her son an opportunity to experience and explore avenues that he otherwise may not have.

FAME is using three rooms for music lessons, a room for theater and an art room in the old church building. The team has about 10 music and art teachers. FAME also will partner with Stages Theater Company and CodeAdvantage, which teaches online classes, beginning in January to offer theater and coding programs.

"We're constantly shifting and changing and bringing in new programming for kids," Fortson said. "Once we take over the building entirely, I think we'll be bursting at the seams with activities."

Fortson said she would love to have a FAME bus system to make it easier for kids to get to the center after school. She also hopes to have a grand-opening celebration once the purchase is complete.

"We still have a heavy fundraising lift and a lot of students who are waiting for openings or scholarships, so we're really trying to garner support and make this big dream come true," Fortson said. "We're not giving up, because I fully believe this building is meant to be a center for the arts."

might not see in themselves."

Much of the building, which dates to the early 1900s, has been "really quite beautifully renovated" throughout the years but also retains some of its historic touches, Fortson said. There is a 750-seat, state-of-the-art auditorium that the church renovated, and Fortson said she intends to use it for concerts, theater performances and even panel discussions about the arts.

The building has a capacity of over 1,100, Fortson said. The mixed-use facility is made up of three smaller buildings that were built as separate structures and then combined over time.

With the ongoing fundraising, Fortson said FAME is getting ready to expand its programming and reach in the new year.

"We're still tenants, but the owners have allowed us full use of the building while we're under contract," Fortson said. "We've even been able to host fundraising events here, inviting the community for tours. We want people to come and see what we're doing and where we're going, and how they can help."

FAME hosted a community pizza party and held a big Halloween event for the neighborhood, Fortson said.

Ald. Pat Dowell, who represents the 3rd District, where FAME is, has toured the space and "been a huge support," Fortson said.

Dowell said Fortson and FAME have already had