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Mayor Emanuel Interviews Artist Theaster Gates on "Chicago Stories" Podcast

On this week's episode of "[Chicago Stories](#)" podcast, Mayor Emanuel welcomed world-famous artist Theaster Gates to City Hall to talk about connecting art with neighborhood development, discovering the spiritual life of abandoned spaces, and the "aha" moment that brought it all together.

Gates is an artist, a community developer, an urban planner, a curator, a teacher, and a restorer, but it's been a while since he's seen himself that way.

"The world needs these categories," Gates told Mayor Emanuel, "but in a way I feel like I'm doing *one* thing, which is using my interest in making and my creative gifts and the gifts that I've been given from on high to try to solve problems."

Those problems have been solved with the creation of new spaces like the Dorchester Art and Housing Collaborative, the Stony Island Arts Bank, and the Chicago Arts and Industry Commons, not to mention countless gallery exhibitions here in Chicago and around the world.

But that wasn't Gates's plan when he started. Born in the early-1970s in Chicago's West Side and raised with eight older sisters, Gates's career began along the familiar path of the struggling artist until 2006 when he acquired an abandoned building in his neighborhood, marking the first step in a remarkable journey of neighborhood development that has transformed the artistic life of communities in Chicago and in other cities across the nation, and given him international renown.

"When we look back on it, it's easy to say I was becoming a community developer, but in fact I was being an artist," Gates said. "I simply started acquiring the buildings because I thought they were cool, I acquired the buildings because I wanted to have a studio space, and acquired them because I thought if I have the building next door, I could have more people over and we can have a bigger BBQ."

As Gates told Mayor Emanuel, his "aha" moment actually came long after he started when he was invited to give a TED Talk, forcing him to find a way to communicate to a national audience everything he'd been doing which he himself hadn't fully accounted for.

“I tried to give myself an empowering language around that, which was if an artist is equipped with knowing the rules of how a city works, an artist could potentially advance the beauty and the power and the equity within a city,” Gates said, “and I was accidentally doing that.”

Be sure to listen to the rest of the episode as Gates tells Mayor Emanuel about directing his church choir when he was only 14-years-old, the new artists everyone should watch out for, and what it was like going from a CTA employee to the artist behind the new art fixtures at the CTA’s modernized 95th Street Station.

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