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Mayor Emanuel Interviews Community Leader and Pastor James L. Brooks on "Chicago Stories"

On this week's episode of [Chicago Stories](#), Mayor Emanuel sat down with Pastor James L. Brooks of Harmony Community Church in North Lawndale just before joining his weekly Peace Gathering to hear about his journey of faith, how he's fighting neighborhood violence, and what he's doing to take his church beyond its four walls.

Pastor Brooks' life is dedicated to his faith, but it didn't start out that way. As the son and grandson of ministers, pastoring runs in his family, but his dream growing up was to be an Illinois State Trooper. God, however, had other plans.

Grieving over the loss of his older brother to a drug overdose, Pastor Brooks took a break from college to take a job at the Illinois Department of Corrections. But, as he told Mayor Emanuel, while he was there he saw young people from his own community coming in every week.

"My heart just got really heavy seeing these kids come in droves come to the Department of Corrections, and I said 'what could I do,'" Pastor Brooks told Mayor Emanuel. "I left and came to work with West Side Association of Community Action, and that's when my ministry really ignited in my heart."

As Pastor Brooks shared with Mayor Emanuel, his mission as a pastor and a church leader is "being intentional about being light in darkness."

"We serve a God that did not run from our pain, but enters our pain," Pastor Brooks said. "If we follow Christ, then we should enter the pain of others."

It's that mission that drove him to embark on his weekly Peace Gatherings this summer, which began after a bullet went through the front window of the home of one of his parishioners.

"They called me immediately and let me know what happened," Pastor Brooks said. "They weren't letting me know so I could say 'I'll pray for you,' they were looking for action."

Pastor Brooks did just that by calling members of his church and some community partners including Lawndale Community Church, Hope House, and You Can, and met on the corner of 19th Street and Lawndale.

“From there we decided we would do it every Wednesday and would not stop,” Pastor Brooks said.

That’s meant working with the commander of the Chicago Police Department’s 10th District and Community Policing to learn about the community’s most troubled sections.

“Any area that they identify as high drug-traffic or violence has taken place, the church doesn’t run from it, we’ll enter right there on a Wednesday night,” Pastor Brooks said.

Through all the challenges of his ministry, Pastor Brooks draws strength from the resiliency he experiences in others.

“As a pastor, I think the shepherd ought to smell like the sheep, so I’m intentional in the lives of the congregation, and just hearing their stories of resiliency,” Pastor Brooks said. “Story after story in North Lawndale, you hear tragedy but then you hear triumph, and just hearing those stories really rejuvenates me, it energizes me, and really keeps me going.”

Be sure to listen to the rest of the episode as Pastor Brooks and Mayor Emanuel also talk about being “proximate to pain,” combining the power of the pulpit and the podium, and how his past continues to shape him today.

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