

Abandoned Cars

Chicago is a city of about 2.7 million people in the central United States. Like every city in the world, it has a lot of wealth, but there are also many people who live in poverty. Thousands live in slums that have run-down buildings, vacant shops, and empty lots that attract garbage and rats. Unemployment is high in these districts, schools are poorly funded, and access to health care is minimal.

In one of these poor neighborhoods, a group of youth met regularly at a church youth center to spend time with each other and socialize. They were tired of feeling hopeless and helpless and wanted to do something to make their neighborhood a little bit better. In front of the church sat an abandoned car. Its tires were gone, the glass was broken, the battery had been stolen, and it was dented and rusted. Nearby on the same street there were five other cars just like this one. The youth thought that if they could get rid of the abandoned cars, their neighborhood would be just a bit nicer, and they would feel a little more hopeful.

To begin, they called the city to request that the cars be removed. But they just got passed from one person to another. Next, they went to the city offices. When they finally found someone who would talk to them, they learned it would take two or three years for someone to come and remove the cars. They returned to their neighborhood and found more than 300 residents and business people who would sign a letter to the city asking for the cars to be removed. But back at the city office, they found out that even though the letter was signed by so many people, it would not speed up the process. They would just have to wait.

At this point, they became frustrated. What if the abandoned cars stayed there forever? What if they never moved? "Those cars are ugly," said one girl. "They need a new look!" That got people thinking. If the cars were there for good, could they at least make them look nicer? What would it be like to "dress up" an abandoned car? They began talking about decorations and bright, vibrant colors. A boy sketched some designs on a piece of paper. Then they had another idea. They could go back to the people who had signed their petition and ask for donations to buy the paint and supplies! One of the business owners who donated money for paint also called the newspaper because he was so excited that the young people were taking an interest in their neighborhood.

On a bright Saturday, they gathered to begin painting. A newspaper reporter and a photographer were there. They interviewed the young people and took pictures of the "new" colorful car. At the far end of the street, some officials from the city sat in their car watching.

The next day, the paper featured their story on the front page! A television crew came to the neighborhood to photograph the cars and interview the youth. They were able to talk about their frustration with the city and their desire to have a nicer place to live. Soon the youth were known throughout Chicago and the surrounding communities. They had become celebrities! The next Saturday they looked out on their street to see that all the abandoned cars were gone. The city had finally towed them away!