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Building a City's Future, Rallying Community Service



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Darrell Cobbins does a lot of building. He's building Memphis' inner core. He's building nonprofits. He's growing the city's next crop of young leaders. You figure he probably aced Tinker Toys before the rest of us.

"I always imagined I'd do some kind of save-the-world work," he muses, "but for whatever reason, every job I've had since college has been in the business world." Well, maybe he's not saving the world, but he's definitely changing Memphis for the better. As president and CEO of Universal Commercial Real Estate, he's also carrying the family torch. Both his grandfather and mother were real estate pioneers, and his family has long been involved in civic leadership.

A large focus of Cobbins' work is redeveloping the doughnut hole of neglect in the inner city. Among a host of other projects, he is involved in a massive effort to redevelop the long-shuttered Sears Crosstown building, an iconic 1.4 million-square-foot structure located in a gritty section of midtown. "At this point, we're looking at establishing it as an arts destination — a live-work space for artists, nonprofit arts organizations — sort of a hub for arts activities," says Cobbins. "And bringing in the residential and retail aspects, too."

He helped found [New Path](#) and [MPACT Memphis](#), organizations that encourage civic engagement and community service from young up-and-comers. "A lot is achieved when people actually get to know each other and work together on something and build trust and confidence in each other," he says.

Cobbins is a family man. "I just became a dad 18 months ago," he notes, "so all of my experiences are connected to my little man."

He's an avid supporter of the arts, and looks for opportunities to share this love with fellow Memphians. Recently, he took his wife and son to see the Dirty Dozen Brass Band at the [Levitt Shell](#). "There were probably 3,000 people on this lawn with blankets and chairs and picnic baskets," he says. "It was like Mardi Gras in Memphis, because people were dancing like they do on Bourbon Street with their umbrellas in the air."

Cobbins enjoys the sense of discovery he finds in new experiences like Opus One, a program started last year by the [Memphis Symphony Orchestra](#). "They do a music program where they go without a conductor into untraditional music venues," he explains. One performance was held in an abandoned warehouse, and another in a hip indie bar called the [Hi-Tone Cafe](#), where the orchestra performed with rock musician Harlan T. Bobo. "They came into his world and sort of did this rock-symphonic collaboration," Cobbins explains, adding, "Would you believe that's considered to be groundbreaking? I mean, just to be doing something cool is considered groundbreaking. It just tells you how staid the orchestra world has been."

The soul of Memphis, Cobbins believes, is a jumble of good, bad, old and new converging together. It creates a richness and depth in the community. "It's something that sometimes we take for granted as Memphians, but it's pointed out to us by people who are visiting or new to the area," he notes.

Still, at the end of the day, the next generation of change-makers starts at home. "My son laughing makes me laugh," he says. "When he finds joy and happiness in something that tickles him, it tickles me to death."