

# **Harlemite Grandmother Sherri Culpepper Forced to House Squatters for Over a Decade by New York City Agencies In Brownstone Regentrification Effort**



***Fourth-generation Harlemites, Sherri Culpepper, who took over her family's brownstones in 2012, has been in an ongoing battle with varying New York City agencies to legally maintain ownership of her two properties. In the process, numerous freeloading individuals have been "legally" housed in one of her brownstones for twelve years, residing there without paying rent and utilities or upkeeping any maintenance! Culpepper is in an ongoing battle against the squatters and the city, fighting to harness support for her plight as well as other homeowners in a similar dilemma. Culpepper has filed a formal legal complaint (Supreme Court Index #159115 /2022) against numerous New York city***

***agencies and her daughter, Bria, has started a [Change.org petition](#) to support her mom.***

Harlem, NY – Sherri Culpepper is a hard-working grandmother who has enjoyed an illustrious and multi-faceted career. The veteran urban radio producer has never said no to a challenge. She even changed careers after the age of 50, becoming an operating engineer, mastering a large variety of construction equipment, including cranes, bulldozers, and front-end loaders before joining the International Union of Operating Engineers – Local 15, not a small feat as a Black woman. However, the predicament she now finds herself in while trying to preserve her family legacy and save her home is a situation she never saw coming.

The fourth-generation Harlemitte, who took over her family's brownstones in 2012, has been in a twelve-year wrangle with varying New York City agencies to legally maintain ownership of her two properties. In the process, numerous freeloading individuals are now "legally" housed in one of her brownstones and have been residing there for twelve years without paying rent and utilities or upkeeping any maintenance! Culpepper has filed a formal legal complaint (Supreme Court Index #159115 /2022) against numerous New York City agencies, including The City of New York, the New York City Department of Finance, the New York City Department of Buildings, and the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development. She is in an ongoing battle against the squatters and the city, fighting to harness support for her plight as well as other homeowners in a similar dilemma. Her daughter, Bria, has started a [Change.org petition](#) to support her mom.

Culpepper's building has been systematically entangled in a web of condemning bureaucracy. First, her single-family home was erroneously designated as a Single Room Occupancy (SRO). SROs are a form of housing that is typically designed for persons with low or minimal incomes who rent small, furnished

single rooms with a bed, chair and sometimes a small desk. Second, her biggest blow came in 2014 when the home was unceremoniously “selected” by the Housing Preservation and Development’s (HPD) Alternate Enforcement Program, better known as the “slumlord” program, and served with 52 violations and fines. Forty-nine of them had been corrected decades before, but never administratively removed from the record books, in turn creating additional ongoing issues and setbacks for her. Both the SRO and HPD codes have allowed the freeloaders “legal,” no-rent housing.



As one of a diminishing number of original Harlem brownstone homeowners, Culpepper alleges these efforts were enacted to force her to sell her historical property in a massive gentrification effort seen throughout many urban cities. In addition to the SRO designation and HPD’s tactics, Culpepper has been continuously served an onslaught of ongoing violations and fines over the years.

“Brownstones hold generational history and wealth here in New York, yet, per gentrification, so many of the original owners have been displaced by the city and corporate contractors coming to takeover. I have refused to sell and so here we are, over a decade later and I find myself with more than seven tax liens, numerous retained and since fired attorneys, and hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines, erroneous violations, legal fees, and interest. And on top of that, I am still taking care of numerous people living free in my home because the city has sanctioned it. I believe my so-called “tenants” are being supported and encouraged to create violations, damage, and vandalize my property!” cites Culpepper. “It’s disappointing that in 2024, redlining and systemic racism continue to hold and prevent certain communities from what’s just and fair.”

When Culpepper took ownership of the home in 2012, she also inherited a house full of cousins who had been living rent-free because of family ties. The cousins started renting out spaces in the home to total strangers. Along with contending with the cousins and new tenants, Culpepper, a grandmother, and mother of three, found herself in ongoing legal entanglements with the city. Her home was identified as one of the most distressed in the community district, despite not fitting the criteria required of the program. In fact, she attests that she has been overly attentive with the upkeep of the property because of the skills garnered from her professional construction background.

Culpepper's great-grandparents moved into the brownstone in 1929, with a family of nine people at the time, including her great-grandfather's church occupying the parlor floor. The brownstone holds deep, cultural, and familial ties as her great-grandfather was also the accountant for freedom fighter, Honorable Marcus Mosiah Garvey in the early 1930's! In addition, her great uncle was one of the Port Chicago 50, a group wrongly accused of mutiny by the U.S. Navy in 1944 and represented by NAACP's attorney, the Honorable Thurgood Marshall. Until 1974, for 42 years, the family rented the property before the owner finally sold the real estate to her great-grandmother and four of her children. For the last 88 years, the only people living in the building were immediate family members and an occasional close family friend passing through.

Culpepper's ultimate dream after securing and maintaining ownership of her brownstones is to use her family's property to continue their legacy of community activism. She hopes to revise her brownstone as an inner city, sustainable, eco-friendly workspace and teach children in the neighborhood about organic gardening, water harvesting, creating green roofs, and utilizing recycled building materials for new constructions.

To contact Sherri Culpepper and support her effort to save her Harlem brownstones, sign the petition at [Change.org](https://www.change.org). She can also be reached at [sherriculpepper@gmail.com](mailto:sherriculpepper@gmail.com).