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# Detroit historian battles to preserve his legacy with new fund that will also support youth

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Historic Detroit founder Dan Austin atop the Book Tower before its renovation in 2014. (LOGAN HICKS/Logan Hicks)

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Dan Austin is racing against time. The 45-year-old PR professional and historian behind Historic Detroit — a sprawling digital archive of more than 1,000 buildings and landmarks — is battling stage 4 colorectal cancer. Now he’s working to ensure the stories he’s spent two decades collecting will outlive him, while also creating a scholarship fund to help Detroit youth who want to give back to the city.

It all started during Austin's daily commutes on the Detroit People Mover some 20 years ago, when he first caught site of the towering faded brick building in Grand Circus Park. The People Mover seemed to go out of its way to steer around the abandoned Statler Hotel, almost in a gesture of respect to the venerable building, he said.

Curiosity amid the plan to demolish it spurred Austin to dig into its history — and sparked a passion project of his own.

Designed by George B. Post in the Italian and Renaissance Revival styles, the Statler Hotel opened in 1915 at a cost of \$3.5 million, making it Detroit's most expensive and luxurious hotel at the time and the largest hotel in the Midwest, Austin wrote in the building's history on [HistoricDetroit.org](https://www.historicdetroit.org).

"I was just blown away to learn that, you know, that's where Harry Houdini stayed in Detroit in October 1926 before he died at Grace Hospital on Halloween, and (President) FDR had stayed there," Austin told Crain's recently, recalling all he'd learned about the Statler.

When the hotel came down in 2005, after 30 years of silence and emptiness, Austin looked for its obituary but found none.

"I just thought that people deserved to know that this wasn't just an eyesore ... and also there was still perhaps underneath some dust and grime, behind broken windows, there was still a lot of beauty in these places that could be preserved."

At the same time, many of Detroit's colorful characters and great stories have largely been forgotten, Austin said.

"Buildings are made up of a lot more than just brick and mortar; they are made up of stories of our city and the people who walked the streets before us," he said.

Bitten by the history bug, Austin began researching other buildings like the Book Tower, a 38-story skyscraper, before its 2014 renovation. He spent countless hours digging through archives to read 100-year-old newspaper articles, property records and microfiche in the early days before much of the information and voluminous

reference and citations (that still needs to be waded through) became available online.

He founded the Buildings of Detroit website in 2006-07 to share the stories as he uncovered them and after five years, in 2011, moved them to Historic Detroit. With histories of more than 1,000 buildings, monuments and historic landmarks across the city and some 17,000 photos, the website has its own fan following among history buffs and journalists. It has more than 100,000 followers on social media and last year and drew 1.5 million page views from more than half a million unique visitors.

Asking Austin to choose his favorite story on HistoricDetroit.org is “like asking a mom of 1,000 kids to pick her favorite,” he said.

Austin, communications director for Michigan Central, and his wife Elle have funded the annual costs of the site — about \$2,200-\$2,300 — beyond the contributions of about \$10 per month made through the web-based platform Patreon.

Now, facing the prospect of someone writing his own history as he battles cancer, Austin is cranking out histories for the site (albeit condensed versions) and looking for a way to ensure the Detroit stories he’s helped collect for the past two decades live on.

“I started thinking about my legacy ...I put an awful lot of time ... tears and paper cuts into all of this research. What happens to it when I die?” he said.

A city’s past “needs to play a role and help guide its future, and that both goes for the built environment ... policies and those lessons that we’ve learned from the past, (around) things like redlining, and ‘urban renewal,’” he said.

There are many lessons and mistakes of the past that Detroiters and others have not learned from because they haven’t taken the time to look at the past, Austin said.

He began talking with friends about a way to continue the HistoricDetroit.org website, and it became clear there would likely be no issue raising enough money to ensure the site would continue on for a while, he said.

From there, the conversation evolved into doing something more for the city that Austin said is “a part of (his) very soul.”

With his wife and three board members, Austin launched the nonprofit Austin Past & Future Fund to ensure the histories on the site continue to live and support others who want to help the city through a permanent endowment managed by Fidelity. The fund will provide scholarships to help remove barriers for Detroit youth who love the city and want to give back by earning and applying degrees in areas ranging from social work and teaching to architecture and planning.

The hope is to raise at least \$100,000 to start, Austin said. Patreon supporters continue to make gifts — now tax-deductible. He plans to auction off his personal record collection and friends have offered to host fundraisers in their homes.

“I want to try to help raise as much money as I can while I’m physically able to do so,” Austin said.

“I know there are a lot of people whose hearts are filled with love for this city, but they might not have the financial means to go to college, to get the degree that they need to really give back. If we can help them achieve their goals and help make Detroit even a better place, that’s more than I could ever ask for.”

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