

# HOLMES HEROES

TEXT: DAVE LIEBER WITH FILES FROM CHRISTOPHER REYNOLDS  
PHOTOS: MELISSA SHOOK

ONE MAN DIDN'T GET WHAT HE BARGAINED FOR WHEN HE UNKNOWINGLY HIRED A PAIR OF EX-CONS TO FIX HIS FOUNDATION. HERE'S HOW HOLMES MAGAZINE AND SOME STAND-UP CONTRACTORS STEPPED IN TO HELP OUT.

**F**alling victim to a shady contractor is every homeowner's nightmare, yet hardly a day goes by in my job as The Watchdog columnist for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* when I don't hear about older homeowners getting hit by scam artists.

Royce Benson, a 79-year-old retired graphic artist living alone in Fort Worth, Texas, was one of these homeowners. A local man who ran a tree-trimming service gained Benson's trust after he trimmed Benson's trees. Then, the man introduced Benson to his contractor brother, who showed Benson some problems on his property and suggested he repair the house's many cracks and faulty foundation.

What Benson didn't know was that the brothers had been in and out of jail for years on burglary and theft charges. To Benson, the ex-cons—who even performed a freebie or two—seemed like upstanding contractors, so he hired the brother for the sizable foundation repair job.

But he performed only a quick out-of-the-bag concrete patch job on some of the cracks and slapped on some caulking to cover up cracks throughout the house.

The bill for the work came to \$19,000.

Hearing about the deal, Benson's son Lyndy asked another foundation repair company to examine the man's work. Darrel Ford of Atlas Foundation said, "I don't think they did anything that will help the foundation at all. It was smoke and mirrors. He got absolutely nothing for the money. He could have hired a high school kid to do that patch and caulking."

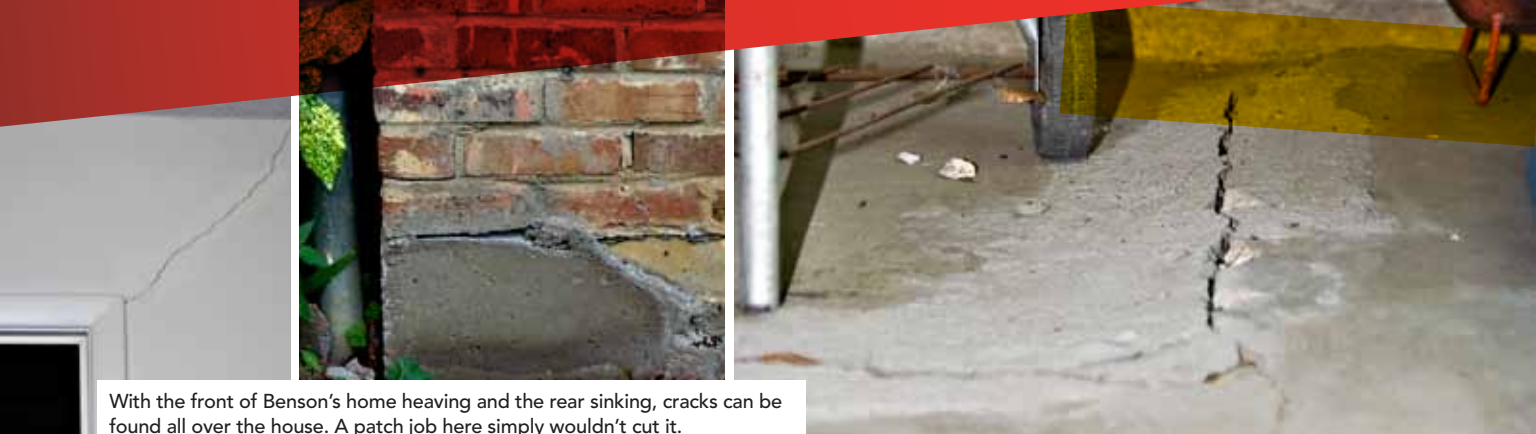
Today the brothers are the subject of a criminal investigation by Tarrant County Assistant District Attorney



**ABOVE:** Fort Worth's Royce Benson, right, fell victim to a band-aid foundation job costing him \$19,000. Luckily, *Holmes Magazine* and some upright folks stepped in to offer their help, free of charge.

**BELOW:** Perma-Pier's Dallas-Fort Worth director Aron Finn, middle, says, "We just got really emotionally involved with the whole thing."





With the front of Benson's home heaving and the rear sinking, cracks can be found all over the house. A patch job here simply wouldn't cut it.

David Lobingier, who says he expects to take the case to a grand jury. "With the amount of money involved and the allegations, it's something we want to investigate," Lobingier says.

But in the meantime, Benson's out over \$19,000 and his house is sinking.

### Holmes Magazine to the rescue

Within hours of my newspaper column about the Benson scam hitting Sunday morning breakfast tables, I

received a call from Aron Finn, the director of the Dallas-Fort Worth office of Perma-Pier Foundation Repair, who was upset about what had happened to Benson.

*Holmes Magazine* also contacted me after being alerted to the newspaper story by a concerned reader. The magazine teamed up with Perma-Pier to help Benson. Lowe's Corporation also stepped in to donate the materials for the job. Everyone banded together

to come to the senior citizen's aid.

"Both of those guys were very confrontational and aggressive," said Finn of the original contractors. "At one point [Benson said] he feared for his safety. We just got really emotionally involved in the whole thing."

With *Holmes Magazine* bringing everyone together, the foundation job was underway. First, Finn and his company set out to adjust any existing piers, or, if they didn't find any, underpin the foundation. But when they performed the initial site assessment, they found that the soil around the house was in poor condition, and that they were a long way from being able to do any pier adjustments or underpinning.

Workers had found a leaking sewer pipe. This, along with drain-



Perma-Pier's CEO Shawn Lawson, above middle, met Benson after Aron Finn, left, was moved by Benson's story.

## UNDERPINNING

A house resting on unstable ground can often result in damage to the foundation—in this case, contractors will sometimes recommend underpinning. This technique essentially raises the house and places it on stronger footings. Perma-Pier's technique—pier underpinning—uses steel or concrete piers driven into solid bedrock, or a layer of earth strong enough to properly support the weight of the house and protect the foundation.



age problems resulting in standing water in the backyard, amounted to seriously unstable soil. Before the foundation could be fixed, the soil would have to be taken care of.

To deal with the drainage and plumbing problems, Perma-Pier contacted Chris Head of the Fort Worth office of Roto-Rooter, who stepped up to offer help.

"We started doing some preliminary work to try to locate possible leaks. We performed a pressure test on the water lines as well as the sewer line to determine if leaks were present," says Head.

They found that the sewer line wouldn't hold any pressure and so they installed a new sewer line, and repaired sections of the kitchen sink line and tub and shower line.

### Getting the job done right

As part of the soil fix, Perma-Pier installed 12-by-12-inch low-profile surface drains that will help address the moisture levels around the home. They also injected a soil stabilizer called Condor SS, an eco-friendly chemical designed to keep the soil under the home from retaining water.

"The soil in that area has a high clay concentration so it's going to react to moisture," says Robby Brown, Perma-Pier's director of operations. "That's what keeps happening to his house. It expands when it gets wet and then it shrinks when it dries out during the summer."

"We are equalizing everything under the foundation to put it back to normal so that we can see what areas we'll need to pier or underpin," says Finn.

Now that the preliminary repairs are almost complete, there's a solid plan for fixing Benson's home. And with \$9,500 already spent and another \$20,000-plus to go, Perma-Pier is in it for the long haul.

"We will go out after 45 days, 90 days and six months to inspect the house and see how much underpinning will need to be done. It's going to be a large job," says Finn. After December, Brown says the project could be wrapped up in three to four weeks. He says he's happy to do it. "This guy was having real trouble with that

**ABOVE:** Director of Operations Robby Brown, left, has to contend with the moisture problems in the clay-rich soil under Benson's home before any underpinning can be done. **BELOW:** Roto-Rooter stepped in to help with the significant drainage and plumbing problems at Benson's home.



other company. He was hung out to dry," says Brown.

Despite the high costs, Finn says the work he's doing, along with the materials and labor donated by Lowe's and Roto-Rooter, will offer its own reward.

"Why wouldn't we spend the money? It's not right what happened to him," says Finn.

At press time, the brothers haven't been charged yet with any crime related to Benson's house. "They could have brought the money back, but

they didn't," Benson says.

As workers tromp through his house week after week working on the problem, Benson is thrilled with the way everything is turning out. He now has real confidence in the contractors at his home. "They are upright and outstanding," he says—a much-needed change. **□**

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