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Tenants Allege Intimidation

Landlords Raise Rents, Make Poor Repairs, Split Apts.

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Long-time tenants of 515 W. 110th St. say their building is starting to feel less like the "family" building they remember from years past and more like a dorm-and they blame their landlord.

Fred Ohebshalom, a rug-merchant and a member of the Long Island-based clan known in New York real estate circles as "the Shalom family," is well-known for removing tenants on state rent-reduction programs from his buildings and replacing them with students who can pay more, say tenants and housing activists.

Since Ohebshalom's company, Acquisition America, dropped a cool \$19 million for both the 91-unit building and its 94-unit neighbor on 110th Street between Amsterdam and Broadway, close to half of the 66 rent-stabilized tenants of 515 W. 110th have left.

And some of them left unwillingly, current tenants allege.

They report that Ohebshalom has hired men to knock threateningly on tenants' doors, post intimidating signs, and demand inspections without warning-acts which often give rent-regulated tenants reason to pack their bags.

"The Shaloms are one of the nastiest predatory landlords in the city," said Bennett Baumer, an organizer for the Metropolitan Council, a citywide tenant's union. "They're eviction happy."

Ohebshalom declined to comment.

When tenants vacate rent-stabilized apartments, landlords can raise the rent by 17 to 20 percent, as per state law. If the rent is above 2,000 dollars per month after the increase, the landlord can remove the unit from the state's rent-reduction program and charge market price-often hundreds more per month.

Rents can soar even higher if landlords renovate apartments before filling vacancies, as they can add 2.5 percent of the cost of renovations to the rent checks.

Ohebshalom's most recent renovations include the legal transformation of kitchenettes into bedrooms, and the installation of new kitchen appliances on a wall of the living room. Vacated one-bedroom apartments at 515 W. 110th St. have become small two-bedroom apartments, and two-bedroom apartments have become three-bedroom apartments.

All tenants interviewed requested to remain anonymous.

One long-time tenant said she was "horrified" when she saw one of the cramped converted apartments for the first time. "Who would want to rent that?" she asked.

The burgeoning numbers of graduate students who flock to Morningside Heights seeking housing close to campus are vital to Ohebshalom's profit margin.

One anonymous second year student at Columbia's School of Social Work said she and her roommate, a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, have had problems with the management at 515 W. 110th.

"But we don't want to move," she said. "It's too convenient for both of us."

Quick tenant turnover characterizes many of the Shalom buildings. Students tend to leave neighborhoods after an average of two to four years, tenant activists estimate, after which landlords can legally raise the rent for the next tenant.

Many of the Shalom family's over 100 apartment buildings citywide are located close to other schools, such as NYU, the Parsons School of Design, and the New School, according to Susi Schropp of the Shalom Tenants Alliance, a coalition of residents of Shalom-owned buildings across the city.

Ohebshalom has also become known among tenants groups and housing activists for filing lawsuits contesting the leases of long-time tenants, using data dug up in background checks as evidence.

"A landlord can't arbitrarily evict a rent-stabilized tenant," Baumer said. "But the Shaloms will cook up frivolous reasons to take you to court to wear you down."

Tenants on 110th Street also say the management seems to neglect repairs and is not efficient about returning phone calls and letters requesting service.

With reports of similar behavior, the Shalom Tenants Alliance filed 30 charges documenting harassment in Shalom-owned buildings with the Department of Housing and Community Renewal, a state agency, last March.

But tenants do not seem convinced that the DHCR will respond in their favor.

"The tactics [the Shaloms] are using are not acknowledged by the DHCR at all," Schropp said.

Harassment is defined by the state agency as "a course of action intended to force a tenant out of his/her

apartment or to cause a tenant to give up rights granted the tenant by the Rent Stabilization Law or Rent Control Law," according to a statement from a DHCR spokesperson. "No owner or anyone acting for the owner may interfere with a tenant's privacy, comfort, or quiet enjoyment of the tenant's apartment. Interference includes reducing services or engaging in baseless court proceedings."

But many tenants are reluctant to go through the motions of charging their landlord with harassment, and may move out just to avoid the hassle.

Rent-stabilized tenants "can't get any satisfaction [from the landlord]," one tenant of over 10 years at 515 W. 110th St. said anonymously. "They can't get repairs done, so they leave."

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