



Housing Briefs

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To 25 Years and Counting...

By Jack Kaplan | LCBH Founder, First Executive Director, and Self-Proclaimed Relic

Twenty-five years ago a band of energetic lawyers came together to address community concerns about the condition of distressed multi-family buildings in Rogers Park.

Each attorney was assigned a building as "client" and was responsible for developing strategies to improve the situation. In housing court we worked closely with building residents, neighborhood organizations and the city's corporation counsel's office. We intervened in cases, seeking receivership.

We found that recurring factors were usually involved in the housing stock deterioration that impacted mostly our lower income residents. Building code violations, utility bill arrears, property tax delinquency, poor management, inadequate tenant screening and absentee ownership were among the key indicators. This led to the development of the Neighborhood Early Warning System, now operating under the auspices of the Center for Neighborhood Technology.

We received a sizable grant from the Amoco Foundation, which enabled us to establish an independent public interest law organization, The Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing. The upper story of David Orr's 49th ward aldermanic office became our first "home" in 1982. I still recall the day I redecorated my office with a fresh coat of paint and a volunteer recently graduated from law school, Matt Kennelly. Not too long after, Matt became president of the board of LCBH, and ultimately federal judge.

My first hire as executive director was an office manager who would do it all. Irene Mitchell became the obvious choice when she organized my messy desk to help me find her job description during her interview.

The choice of staff attorney also became self-evident when a lawyer living in Hyde Park responded to the job listing with a cover letter expressing her amazement that her "dream job" actually existed. Barbara Grau worked tirelessly throughout her 5-year tenure. Her life was sadly cut short but her memory is well served by the Housing Advocacy Award made annually by LCBH.

During my years as executive director we kept one foot planted in the communities of Rogers Park and Edgewater while developing coalitions with community-based organizations to get at the root problems. Our advocacy at the city, county and state levels led to model programs including the Tax Reactivation Program which transferred tax delinquent multi-family

properties to not-for-profit developers; the Housing Abandonment Prevention Program which provided court-appointed receivers with CDBG funds to repair buildings and keep the utilities functioning; and a city housing trust fund financed by the developers of Presidential Towers, who had initially received a waiver on their obligation to include low and moderate income housing units in their plush high rises.

Our advocacy also led to what's now called a slap suit, in which Earl Niemoth and his real estate company, Create, Inc., sued LCBH and several of us individually for defamation. Our defense was as simple as it was successful -- we were telling the truth about the disrepair of his buildings and his failure to return security deposits.

It is a tribute to my successors -- Audrey Lyon, Julie Ansell, Kathy Clark and their staffs and volunteers -- that 25 years later LCBH is a dynamic organization playing a vital role in one of society's core social justice issues. In LCBH's recent Annual Report, Kathy Clark addressed the matter directly, citing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in support of the proposition that housing is a human right.

Twenty five years is a significant chunk of human endeavor and deserving of celebration in the life of a worthy organization. We must continue to be vigilant to make housing a human right, available to those least able to afford it. ■



HomeSharing

Dr. Alexander, a 79 year old widower sought an individual to share his beautiful, big home in a historic district on the south side. Emily Robinson is a 48 year-old Chicago woman who was looking for "affordable housing", though she preferred to find that housing through "community" rather than on her own. By choosing to live in the same house, Dr. Alexander and Emily have both found important needs in their lives met through **HomeSharing**. And their needs have been met through a creative connection ... *gardening!*

Emily could not afford the price Dr. Alexander was asking, but she was able and excited to offer the gift of one of her passions - gardening skills - in exchange for lower rent. Though Dr. Alexander did need extra financial resources, he also wanted someone who could beautify his yard. **HomeSharing** made the match worthwhile for both individuals. Just last week Emily and her brother planted over 100 spring bulbs that Dr. Alexander is already eager to see! ■

SAVE THE DATE!

Hearts for Housing - Play Cards, Win Prizes, Help Families
Thursday, February 9, 2006 @ 6 pm
Union League Club - 65 W. Jackson, Chicago
To register, contact Erin Bauer at 312-347-7600, ext. 24
or RSVP@lcbh.org. \$25 to play



Volunteer Venue

The value of a volunteer hour according to the Independent Sector: \$17.55.

The value of a volunteer hour to LCBH: priceless.

Volunteer Spotlight



Tony Hopp

Attorney of the Day (AOD) Volunteer Partner, Wildman Harrold

It's difficult to comprehend where a partner at Wildman Harrold, the 14th largest firm in Chicago, finds time to provide low-income tenants facing eviction with free legal services.

When you meet Tony Hopp the surprise is lost as his motivation and passion leave you wondering if there is more you can do to help ensure justice and affordable housing for all Chicago land renters. Tony has a solid understanding of the affordable housing crisis in Chicago and believes that in order "for children to grow up they need stability. They need to know there is a place they can be safe. We as lawyers have the skills to help with that and we really owe it to ourselves and the profession to help with these cases."

Tony's tenure as an AOD volunteer started after he attended LCBH's 2003 Annual Reception and Awards Ceremony at the request of Nancy Loeb, a member of LCBH's Board of Directors. The awards ceremony shed light onto the opportunities in Chicago for individuals in the legal profession concerned about affordable housing to use their skills and talents to help community members facing the threat of homelessness. Tony utilizes his 17 years of experience in the courtroom, including forceful retainer and entry litigation for commercial clients, to achieve success in eviction court such as defeating an order of possession to settling two cases simultaneously in the hallway outside of the courtroom.

At LCBH's 25th Anniversary Reception and Awards Ceremony held in September at Jenner and Block, Tony received the AOD

Volunteer of the Year award for his unwavering commitment to the program, his clients, affordable housing, and to LCBH.

Tony's relationship with LCBH, he believes is mutually beneficial as he is able to combine his interest in affordable housing with what he knows how to do, all while "bringing visibility to the firm and keeping the pro bono program energized." When Tony is not in the courtroom he gives his time and energy to his family and his church, St. Thomas the Apostle in Naperville. ■

Interested in becoming a volunteer?

Please contact Pro-Bono Coordinator, William Moore at (312) 347-7600 x15 or at aodprogram@lcbh.org.

The Better Housing Action Network Launched and Achieving Success

The Better Housing Action Network is a project of the Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing to engage former clients as supporters of our legislative agenda. Director of Policy Doug Schenkelberg and social work intern Rebekah Ray Nguyen are developing a program that combines organizing and advocacy with case management services to build a bridge between our clients and our policy work. After months of planning, focus group meetings and outreach efforts, we held the first monthly Action Network meeting in October to discuss rental assistance programs. Over a dozen people attended to share their stories of facing the risk of homelessness. Their stories contributed to an effort to generate media in support of increasing the Homelessness Prevention Fund by the It Takes a Home Campaign. In a first victory for the Network, the Coriano family's story formed the basis of a favorable article in the Chicago Tribune.

Nearly 50 former clients have expressed interest and 15 households have actively maintained contact with us by asking questions, offering ideas and sharing honestly what participation means to them. One told us that just hearing other people talk about facing the same struggles was encouraging for her. Another promised to always be available for any work to make affordable housing more available for his family and community. For many, hospitalization, yet another move, childcare and even the cost of a bus card can make attending a meeting nearly impossible.

Our last meeting was held on December 17 at the John Marshall Law School, and included State Senator Iris Martinez who helped the Action Network celebrate the holidays. It was an exciting and rewarding experience for Network members to speak directly to an elected official who not only shared her personal stories involving affordable housing, but also actively listened to the concerns of her fellow community members. LCBH would like to give a special thanks to Whole Foods and Starbucks who provided the Action Network with generous amounts of food and beverages for the holiday celebration.

It only takes seconds to make your voice heard on critical affordable housing issues in Illinois.

Here's how:

- 1) Go to www.housingmatters.net
- 2) Sign-up with your home address.
- 3) Get as many other folks to sign-up as you can.

It's your right to be heard, and our representatives' job to listen! ■