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Columbia University Expansion Has West Harlem Residents Fearful

Neighbors worry that expansion will push them out of their rent stabilized apartments.

By MARI HAYMAN

Irma Bonetti, 44, has lived in the same West Harlem apartment all her life. The window of her eighth floor unit provides a commanding view of Upper Manhattan rooftops and water towers, the George Washington Bridge, and farther away, the Bronx and its distant housing projects. Below on West 143rd street, horns honk perpetually, sirens blare and reggaetón music pulsates from the open doors of vans double-parked along Broadway.

Bonetti grew up with this view and these sounds. Her grandfather, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, signed the lease for the apartment in the mid-1970s until it passed to Bonetti's mother, who was recently hospitalized. Bonetti's elderly aunt also lives in the building, in an identical apartment five floors below her. Although Bonetti now pays the rent, for years the lease remained in her deceased grandfather's name.

In early 2007, Bonetti's building came under the management of Vantage Properties, a private equity developer that touts "opportunistic investment and redevelopment strategies" on its Web site. Vantage was founded in 2006, but already, the company owns properties in Washington Heights, Harlem and Queens. In an October 2008 report, the Association for Neighborhood Housing and Development (ANHD) estimated that the company, along with other private equity developers like Pinnacle Group, had purchased 90,000 units of rent-regulated housing in the last four years. According to a 2008 DHCR report, there are 850,000 rent-regulated apartments in all of New York City.

Gentrification has a long history in Manhattan, and is certainly not confined to West Harlem. But since Columbia University announced its expansion north of West 125th Street in 2003, the sale of so many rent-stabilized buildings to developers like Vantage worries community members. Costly building improvements and fewer rent-stabilized apartments could force poorer residents out of one of Manhattan's last working-class neighborhoods.

When the new property owners moved into the neighborhood, West Harlem residents noticed. "Near the end of 2006, that's when everything started changing," says Bonetti. "All of a sudden the neighborhood started to get a little cleaner, there were more police, and the new landlords moved in. And people started getting all these notices, saying 'get out.'" Bonetti adds, "most of the old tenants in this building got one of those notices, people who have been here for 20, 30, 40 years."

Bonetti's aunt, a resident of the building for the last 40 years, was one of the first to receive a legal notice from Vantage. "The way it happens in this building is that they stop accepting your rent," says Bonetti. "And then you get a letter in the mail that says, 'we are currently activating a legal process against you; we will not be accepting your rent.'"

Bonetti, along with other residents in West Harlem, sees the recent changes as a result of Columbia's much-publicized expansion into the neighborhood. "All the problems started happening when Columbia announced that they were expanding, and once that happened the landlords went crazy," she says. "It was like everything was sold and bought right under us and all these changes started taking place."

Rolando Rodriguez, 39, an organizer at Mirabal Sisters Cultural and Community Center, believes the changes are part of a larger, historical trend. “Columbia is a very important player, but it’s also beyond Columbia because those forces are already at play in a wider sense,” he says. “The idea is that they need to get the poorer people out, especially out of Manhattan. If you look at all the other neighborhoods, they have seen this already; for example, in the Lower East Side.”

Rodriguez came to New York from Puerto Rico 21 years ago and remembers Upper Manhattan in the 1980s: “The ’80s was a period in which Washington Heights was totally run down by drugs; the drug traffic up here was unbelievable,” he says, recalling that wealthier taxpayers eventually left the neighborhood for the suburbs.

“Now they’re coming back, and Bloomberg and everybody of course wants them back.” Rodriguez adds. “Certain sectors allow places to go to waste so that later on they can come back and own these places.”

For Rodriguez and other community organizers, Vantage, the company that owns Bonetti’s building, is a prime proponent of this strategic gentrification. According to court documents, Vantage has acquired 9,200 rent-regulated apartments during the past two years in New York City, and only one percent of the units in the acquired buildings were vacant. But the documents say that Vantage “expects to vacate 20-30% of the apartments within the first year following acquisition of certain buildings, substantially renovate the vacant units and raise rents to market levels”.

By definition, a rent-regulated apartment in New York City costs less than \$2,000 a month – a bargain for housing in Manhattan but also a necessity for tenants in neighborhoods like West Harlem, where the 2000 Census estimated that the median salary in 1999 was \$24,285 a year. Because rent-regulated buildings are so desirable, the New York City Rent Guidelines Board estimates that their typical annual vacancy rate is only 5.6 percent. How, then, can companies like Vantage achieve the 20 to 30 percent annual vacancy rates that their business strategy requires?

Garrett Wright, staff attorney for the Urban Justice Center, said that landlords like Vantage have multiple ways of securing vacant apartments: “Unfortunately, many people have experienced landlords harassing tenants out of their apartments so they can push that legal regulated rent up,” he explained. “If they don’t have heat or hot water, or have repair issues, or the landlord is challenging the tenant in some way, enough of those situations happen where you have tenants forced out of their units.”

Vantage denies that the company harasses tenants in rent-stabilized units in order to remove them from their apartments. In public statements, Vantage officials highlight the fact that Vantage improves buildings that have been in disrepair for years. Vantage’s vice president of community affairs, Elizabeth Holmes, agreed to speak for this article but ultimately did not return multiple phone calls asking for comment. In an August interview with the New York Daily News, Holmes stated, “we do not discriminate between our market rate tenants and our rent-stabilized tenants.”

According to Wright, just cause provisions mean that today, landlords have to prove there’s misconduct or a legally-specified reason to evict a tenant from a building.

Bonetti recalls harassment under the previous landlord, before Vantage took control of her building: “When my grandfather was alive, the building manager would constantly knock on his door, say, ‘Oh, do you live here alone? This apartment is too big for you, I need you to leave’, or he would say, ‘We’re gonna find a way to get you out of here’. He literally terrorized my grandmother, my grandfather. When my grandparents passed away, he terrorized my mother.”

Now, the harassment takes place in court, through eviction notices, holdover lawsuits and rent nonpayment

proceedings.

Bonetti, who works full-time and is currently completing her B.A. at NYU, never had any intention of taking on Vantage in court, until Vantage began a legal proceeding against her aunt last year. Eventually, Bonetti received a notice too, questioning her hospitalized mother's occupancy of the apartment and the fact that the lease was still in her grandfather's name, despite her repeated efforts to correct it.

Bonetti admits, "I work at an ad agency, and the last thing on my mind was what's going on in the building because I was hardly ever home. But I kept calling, and that's how I started to figure out what my rights were. I started looking online more and more, I went to housing court, I got information there, and that's pretty much how I got involved in this."

Today Bonetti is the tenant representative of her building in West Harlem. Together with Mirabal Sisters, Rodriguez's organization, Bonetti and her neighbors have initiated a lawsuit against Vantage, still in progress. Bonetti says, "It was me getting the letter and going to Mirabal. They pushed me into starting a tenant's association and I was like, 'Who, me? No, no, no!' and they said, 'No, you have to do it', so I was forced into it, really!"

Bonetti admits that her new line of work isn't easy: "I literally have to go through hell, because I have to take off work, fill out paperwork at court, take whatever pictures that have to be taken, wait for the judge to find a date, and take off another day of work to come back," she says.

On the other hand, Bonetti is grateful for the opportunity to fight back. "I thank Vantage for being the way they are, because if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't know as much as I do now," she says. "I didn't care; it wasn't happening to me. But now it is."

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