

# Caveat Renter

BY J.A. LOBBIA

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**'You're gonna be dead,' threatened one caller on the other end of Tom Sullivan's phone.** Another one menaced: 'You're gonna end up in the E.R.'

Who are these guys? Who is Sullivan? A low-level mafia informer? An insurgent in a corrupt union shop planning to expose wrongdoing? Neither. Sullivan is a consumer advocate of sorts.

What generates such animosity is the type of consumers he represents: tenants.

Sullivan is a cofounder of Landlord Profile, a service that provides tenants with thumbnail sketches of their current or prospective landlords. Give Sullivan and his partner, Richard Oravec, \$99 and about an hour, and they'll tell you how many housing and building code violations the city and state have registered at a particular address, whether a landlord has a history of overcharging tenants, if tenants are suing the owner, or if there are judgments filed against a landlord.

"When you rent an apartment, you give a landlord your bank account numbers, tax information," says Sullivan. "They run a credit history; they know everything about you. But you know nothing about the landlord except what they want to tell you."

Realistically, that wouldn't include the fact, for instance, that one East Village landlord seeking to rent a studio for \$1900 had an outstanding violation from a city agency for failing to maintain an exterior wall, along with three other less serious infractions. Or that another neighborhood owner was written up for having exposed electrical wiring. Or that a Chelsea landlord was under investigation by the state Division of Housing and Community Renewal (DHCR) for overcharging a tenant.

Of course such probing into landlords' affairs provokes ire. "We get threats all the time, three or four a week," says Sullivan. "People say they'll sue us and worse because bad landlords are afraid this will cost them tenants. And there are other threats, physical threats, which come sporadically. They don't identify themselves, but we feel they're from the landlord quarter. It's usually some small-time guy who's got this landlord thing going on the side. It's not like any major Manhattan landlord is going to come hit me on the head with a baseball bat. He could just sue me."

That, too, has been brought up. "The RSA keeps threatening to sue me," Sullivan says, referring to the Rent Stabilization Association, the city's largest landlord



lobby, which did not return *Voice* calls. "They say this is private information."

On the contrary, it is totally public, and available to anyone, including people who are not Sullivan's clients. Sullivan and his partner simply cruise government computer systems that document a whole host of information about buildings and their owners. "I have access to a lot of things that people don't know they can get," says Sullivan.

Anyone who wants to make the rounds of housing court, the buildings department, the city's housing agency, state supreme court, and several other stops could do the work themselves. But considering the aggravation and cost of putting together the profile yourself—finding the right office, dealing with dead-eyed clerks, making futile efforts to coax archaic copying machines into action—\$99 seems worth it, at least for a start.

"I can tell you from doing public research that nobody at the city wants to help you," says Sullivan. "They want you to go away."

But doing it yourself could produce a more meaningful report. For instance, Sullivan's data shows whether tenants have sued a landlord, but gives no details, which are available in the courts. The reports list the number and severity of violations, but do not always reveal what they are. And while the reports are technically accurate, they may not give a full picture.

To avoid legal concerns, Sullivan says, his lawyer has told him to avoid broadly profiling a landlord, limiting inquiries to a specific address rather than researching all the properties one person owns. As a result, they may not turn up the fact that owners may have wretched conditions in some buildings but not others. Steve Croman, for instance, made the *Voice's* Ten Worst Landlord list in 1998. But his West Village properties always come up clean on Landlord Profile because they lack the decrepitude of his Little Italy holdings, where long-term tenants are pressured to vacate and make way for high-paying newcomers.

Tenants in place can also use the Landlord Profile to investigate their current landlord, most commonly to see if a landlord is overcharging them, by looking at DHCR records. If the current rent is out of whack with the last registered rent, tenants can challenge the rate, so long as they do so within four years of the time they began paying rent. "The Landlord Profile team helped me discover my 'real rent,'" according to one testimonial on Landlordprofile.com. "That s.o.b. had been overcharging me for years!!!"

Sullivan says he runs about 100 reports a month now, many for parents in Connecticut or New Jersey whose children are moving to the city looking for "a



\$2000 one-bedroom or studio." Sullivan's very familiar with the market: He and Oravec were brokers for high-end residential firms.

"We've been in the business for 15 years and we know who's bad and who is not," says Sullivan. "The fact is, we know this stuff because we used to work the other side."

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