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Incinerator Rats, 'Predatory Equity,' and Other Horror Stories From 'NYC's Worst Landlord'

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

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Marta Melendez stands in front of her building at 825 Gerard, which used to be surrounded by flower boxes. The landlord filled them in with concrete.

[Christian Hansen](#) for the Village Voice

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"The incinerator gets so piled up the rats are eating off it," says Anna Edwards, who's lived at 2454 Tiebout Avenue in the Bronx for 35 years. The 65-year-old retired housekeeper says she sees the garbage heap in the backyard soar to the first floor.

"Last winter was the worst winter I've been

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through since I've lived in the city," says Alfred Amartei, a retired token-booth clerk who immigrated from Ghana in 1970 and has lived at 815 Gerard Avenue for 41 years. The building, a few blocks southeast of Yankee Stadium, went four months without heat or hot water. "We call 311, you get heat for two or three days, then you're back to square one."

Next door at 825 Gerard Avenue, the landlord tried to evict day care center operator Marta Melendez, who's lived in the building for 36 years, for not paying two months' rent – a case that was dismissed when she showed the court her receipts.

At 2675 Creston Avenue in Kingsbridge, the building had no hot water from September through May, says Brigida Valenzuela, a 29-year-old youth-leadership worker. She, her mother, and her older sister boiled water to stay clean.



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All four of these buildings are owned by Ved Parkash, who was [named the city's worst landlord](#) by Public Advocate Letitia James last November. In 11 of the 43 Bronx buildings Parkash controls, the city Department of Housing Preservation and Development had more than 2,200 open violations. As of July 9, 825 Gerard had 39 open "C" violations – which HPD considers "immediately hazardous" – including large water leaks, lead paint in several apartments, and a 30-foot crack 1½ inches wide in the building's north wall.

Tonight, Parkash's Bronx tenants are meeting with him and Public Advocate Letitia James, a showdown that is the culmination of 18 months of organizing with the help of the [Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition](#) and CASA – [Community Action for Safe Apartments](#). Parkash's main domain is the western Bronx, one of the few areas of the city where renters can find apartments for less than \$1,500 a month, but where they often face landlord neglect and harassment to force them out and replace them with people who will pay more.

"That's why he wants to take me out," Melendez told the *Voice*. "He thinks I'm stupid and don't know my rights."



A dead mouse on the stairs of Alfred Amartey's building in the Bronx.

[Christian Hansen](#) for the *Village Voice*

The design of 825 Gerard belies the stereotype of the South Bronx of the 1970s as a burning-hell slum. Its 1920s architecture, scallop-shell designs over the front door and spiral columns rising from the third floor to the sixth, evoke an older Bronx, where a spacious five-room apartment signified prosperity for working-class Jews and Puerto Ricans escaping the teeming tenements of the Lower East Side and East Harlem.

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"The building was beautiful, like on Park Avenue," says Melendez, pointing to the rows surrounding

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the front entrance where there used to be flowerbeds. Now, the only green plants are from moss and weeds growing through the cracks in the concrete that Parkash put down over the flowerbeds.

What makes a landlord the city's "worst" is a subjective concept, but there are two main types. One group might be called "forcible gentrifiers," such as the [recently indicted Steven Croman](#), who harass tenants to move out because they know

they can rent vacant apartments for \$3,000 a month or more. Parkash would qualify more as an old-fashioned slumlord, failing to make repairs or provide basic services—although he also regularly tries to evict tenants for offenses as small as owing less than one month's rent, says CASA organizer Pablo Estupiñan.

Estupiñan calls Parkash a "primary example of predatory equity." That's a business model that emerged during the mid-'00s real-estate boom. Private equity firms bought up buildings in areas they considered ripe for gentrification, such as Harlem and Washington Heights, at prices that could only be profitable if they forced out rent-stabilized tenants. One, the Pinnacle Group, tried to evict more than 5,000 of its 21,000 tenants between 2005 and 2007.

Parkash and Croman were [on a list of ten "predatory equity" landlords](#) targeted in March 2015 by Stabilizing NYC, a coalition of 14 neighborhood housing groups and two city-wide organizations. The group defined predatory-equity buildings as those with excessive debt, rising rents, bad conditions, and harassment of tenants. The western Bronx had the city's highest concentration, with 1,500 to 4,000 affected apartments per ZIP code. The immediate rewards for ousting tenants aren't as great as they are in the East Village or Bushwick, but landlords still get an automatic 20% increase on vacant apartments.

"If I move out, Parkash will say hallelujah," says Amarte. He pays \$741 for a studio. The new tenant downstairs pays \$1,100. Melendez pays \$767 for her two-bedroom apartment, which she's painted tan with brown trim and decorated with African figurines. A new tenant pays \$1,500.

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Alfred Amartei, 73, has lived in his building in the Bronx for 41 years and is not happy with the state of that building since Ved Parkash has become the building's owner.

[Christian Hansen](#) for the Village Voice

Earlier this year, Parkash tried to evict Amartei for not giving repair workers access when they showed up at his apartment without the required 24-hour notice to fix cracks in his ceiling. The case was adjourned, and the work was done on the date agreed to in court, he says.

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Bogus Housing Court cases, however, can bring landlords results. Less than 10 percent of tenants facing eviction have lawyers, and “if a tenant doesn’t have an attorney, they don’t know what their rights are,” says Bronx Legal Services staff attorney Carolyn Norton. “As the Bronx changes, we’re going to see more and more of that.”

In a letter tenants sent to Parkash last month, they accused him of using housing court as a “means of intimidation.”

“So much so that when we really need to talk to someone from the office, we know that the easiest way to reach the office is to speak...in Housing Court,” the letter read.

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(Parkash responded that court “is not a means of intimidation, but rather it is a form of legal recourse.”)

Tenants also complain about difficulty getting repairs from Parkash. “He doesn’t answer. They give you an attitude. They leave you on hold,” says Michelle Mesa, 24, a forensic-science student at John Jay College who lives at 2454 Tiebout, which Parkash bought three years ago. Her family is still waiting for repairs ordered by Housing Court in April 2015—“simple repairs, patch up walls, patch up holes,” she says.

Residents there recently filed an “HP action” lawsuit to demand repairs, their fifth in the last three years. HPD has also filed five. Juan J. Lozada, the building’s former porter, says he quit when Parkash told him his pay would be cut from \$750 to \$300 a week.



Brigida Valenzuela is organizing the tenants in her building to demand better living conditions from Ved Parkash.

[Christian Hansen](#) for the Village Voice

It took two years to get a working lock on the front door, says Anna Edwards, and sometimes you have to push a piece of metal on the elevator’s ceiling to get it to open. At 2675 Creston, the elevator has an out-of-service sign on its door.

The one at 825 Gerard usually doesn’t work on weekends, says Melendez.

Despite the lack of hot water and repairs, tenants at 2675 Creston did not go on rent strike. “We could get put on a blacklist,” says Valenzuela. As court records are public, tenant-screening companies buy them and sell the databases to landlords, who often assume that a prospective renter who’s ever appeared in Housing Court is either a deadbeat, a nuisance, or a troublemaker.

“We do not harass tenants. We do not seek to remove long-term tenants,” Parkash’s son, Anurag, told the *Voice*. Parkash “has never deregulated any apartment under his ownership,” he adds—vacant apartments can’t be deregulated if their rent is below \$2,700—and often “charges below the legal rent for apartments.” (Such discounts, called “preferential rents,” are common in the Bronx, and landlords who give them generally retain the right to raise the rent to the legal limit when the lease expires – which can lead to surprise rent increases.)

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“All our repairs are done as required by law. Repairs are done so that they last and leave tenants in comfortable living conditions,” he added.

Tonight, Parkash will have to parry these complaints in person.

“He’s got human beings living here,” 2454 Tiebout resident Luis Cruz says. “Not animals.”

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