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METRO

Kushner family accused of pushing out low-rent tenants

By Associated Press

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Getty Images

The hammering and drilling began just months after Jared Kushner's family real estate firm bought a converted warehouse apartment building in the hip Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

Tenants say it started early in the morning and went on until nightfall, so loud that it drowned out normal conversation, so violent it rattled pictures off the walls. So much dust wafted through ducts and under doorways that it coated beds and clothes in closets. Rats crawled through holes in the walls.

More than a dozen current and former residents of the building told the Associated Press that they believe the Kushner Cos.' relentless construction, along with rent hikes of \$500 a month or more, were used as part of a campaign to push tenants out of rent-stabilized apartments and bring high-paying condo buyers in.

If so, it was a remarkably successful campaign. An AP investigation found that over the past three years, more than 250 rent-stabilized apartments — 75 percent of the building — were either emptied or sold as the Kushner Cos. was converting the building to luxury condos. Those sales so far have totaled more than \$155 million, an average of \$1.2 million per apartment.

“They won, they succeeded,” says Barth Bazyluk, who left with his wife and baby daughter in December. “You have to be ignorant or dumb to think this wasn’t deliberate.”

This up-close look at one of the Kushner Cos.' largest residential buildings in New York City illustrates what critics describe as the firm's sharp-elbowed business practices while it was run by President Donald Trump's son-in-law and eventual White House adviser Jared Kushner.

The Kushner Cos. told the AP that it didn't harass any tenants to get them out. But the data suggest turnover at the building known as the Austin Nichols House was significantly higher than city averages for coveted rent-stabilized buildings, leaving behind a trail of anger, disrupted lives and a lawsuit to be filed Monday in which tenants say they were harassed and exposed to high levels of cancer-causing dust.

“We've investigated hundreds of rent-stabilized buildings and this is one of the worst we've ever seen,” says Aaron Carr, head of tenant watchdog Housing Rights Initiative.

In a statement, the Kushner Cos. acknowledged it received some complaints about construction during major renovations, which ended in December 2017, but that it responded to them immediately and that “tremendous care was taken to prevent dust and inconvenience to tenants.” It said many tenants moved out when their rent was increased to the maximum allowed under rent stabilization rules.

The city's building department says it sent inspectors to the building dozens of times since 2015 and uncovered no evidence that construction rules were being violated, a finding that some residents say doesn't square with their experiences.

When Jared Kushner and two partners bought the former Wild Turkey bourbon warehouse for \$275 million in April 2015, they made it clear they wanted to convert the building's 338 apartments — all of them rent-stabilized — into condos. All but nine were occupied, and other than maxing out rent increases, developers have few tools if they want to get tenants out.



184 Kent Ave. in Williamsburg

AP

Months after the purchase, the Kushners began extensive renovations, ripping out appliances, floors and countertops that had been installed five years before.

“There were consistently people in the hallway early, 8 or so, banging on things, taking down walls,” says tech salesman Marcus Carvalho, who left the building in December. “I didn’t want to spend another minute in that construction zone, not at all.”

A few weeks after Carvalho left, Jane Coxwell couldn’t take the noise anymore either.

“It was drilling from every direction,” says Coxwell, a chef who works late nights and writes at home during the day. “It was impossible to take a call. You could never sit and read a book or get any work done.”

Dust samples taken in May by consultants Olmsted Environmental Services turned up dangerously high levels of lead and crystalline silica, which can cause cancer.

A draft of the pending \$10 million lawsuit alleges Kushner Cos. and its partners attempted to push out tenants by creating unlivable conditions with construction noise and dust in violation of state and city rules and laws. It also alleges the Kushners, by failing to take proper precautions, exposed residents to a “cloud of toxic smoke and dust.”

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The Kushner Cos. disputed the findings of the environmental report, alleging it appeared to be an updated version of a report prepared several years ago. The company didn’t immediately respond when asked for comment about the lawsuit.

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