

Lower Manhattan matters & adventures

Tenants vs. Croman 1

August 15, 2014August 16, 2014 • Zach E.J. Williams



Tenants battling notorious landlord Steven Croman scored a victory last week, but a 15-year struggle continues on E. 18th St.

On Tues., July 22, state Attorney General Eric Schneiderman issued a cease-and-desist order against Anthony Falconite, a former New York Police Department officer, who longtime rent-regulated tenants say, has harassed them on Croman's behalf for years. News reports that Croman himself is the focus of a state investigation could not be confirmed by press time.

"While we cannot comment on potential or ongoing investigations, the attorney general is committed to ensuring that no one — no matter how rich or well connected — is above the law," Schneiderman's office said in a statement. "We are prepared to take action against landlords who use illegal tactics to force rent-regulated tenants out of their homes to raise rents."

The cease-and-desist order states that Falconite engaged in illegal “harassment of tenants, misleading and deceptive business practices,” as well as conducting “tenant relocation services without a license.”



Falconite has reportedly verbally abused tenants, and pestered them incessantly to accept buyout offers, even following them to work. Among the ex-cop’s reported tactics, according to residents of a Croman building on E. 18th St., are entering tenants’ apartments under false pretenses, demanding identification and photographing their possessions, in order to allege later that their primary residence is elsewhere.

“He’s got a whole bag of tricks,” said Cynthia Chaffee of Falconite.

Chaffee’s battle with the notorious landlord has included seven court appearances since Croman — who has been ranked on top-10 lists of the city’s worst landlords — bought 346 E. 18th St. in 1999. She has refused a six-figure buyout offer from Croman. And she has wrangled with him over accepting Section 8 housing vouchers, as well as addressing 49 outstanding building violations in the apartment that she has occupied for 37 years.

Neighbors give accounts of fending off superfluous legal actions from Croman, who owns about 150 residential buildings in Manhattan, as well as badgering from Falconite.

Sisters Shalimi and Nalimi Valanju have also had their run-ins with Falconite. When Shalimi visited another sister in India earlier this year, a man visited the apartment she has occupied for 50 years.

Family members regularly stay in the apartment during Shalimi’s trips in order to keep an eye on things, but they soon found themselves objects of suspicion.

“He identified himself as ‘Anthony,’ and said that he was working for the landlord’s management, that he needed to come in and look at the apartment for needed repair work,” Shalimi’s niece Ajay Shirsat stated in an affidavit.

As soon as he entered the apartment, Falconite reportedly began taking photos of the interior, examining prescription medications and demanding that those present provide ID, the affidavit states. He then demanded that Shirsat and another family member call their aunts — despite the

11-hour time difference — so that Falconite could determine whether they were the apartment's primary residents.

In buildings with less than six units, a rent-controlled controlled apartment can become market rate if a landlord can prove the tenant does not occupy it as a primary residence, and then evict the tenant. (In larger buildings, vacant rent-controlled units become rent-stabilized.)

Falconite's LinkedIn profile includes 215 endorsements for "private investigations" and 95 for "interrogation."

A Croman representative and Falconite did not respond to requests for comment by press time.

While 19 neighbors in Chaffee's building have opted to leave since 1999, she and her husband, Peter Chaffee, continue to fight back through both a massive file documenting their interactions with Croman and Falconite, as well as an online password-protected hub where about three dozen fellow tenants communicate and organize as part of the Stop Croman Coalition.

Yet, she said, there is a price to pay for their efforts beyond the \$20,475.96 in back rent her landlord claims she owes by Aug. 1. Chaffee moved into the one-bedroom apartment when she was 25. The formerly airy apartment that once sported nice furniture, gradually filled with what today stands at 75 cubic feet of documents relating to her struggles with the landlord. And then there is the internal toll.

"He ruined my life," she said.

Long strips of heavy paper remain on her living room floor, artifacts of the recent paint job that replaced ubiquitous cracks with fresh ivory paint. This recent turn for the better for Chaffee was a long time coming from a landlord who, in the meantime, had plenty of renovation work going on in apartments above and below her.

Meanwhile, she had water dripping from her light fixture, as well as a stretch of 55 days without gas service in the winter of 2011. Between that January and September 2013 she also experienced 113 days without heat or hot water.

Sudden loss of utility service is nothing new, but Chaffee said it often comes without even an explanation from the landlord. Most recently, the day after Falconite was slapped with a cease-and-desist order, she discovered her phone service had been mysteriously shut off.

"These are not unique stories," said Shalimi Valanju. "Thirty, 40 people have similar stories. The aim of it all is getting tenants to take buyouts so that Croman can rent it."

A version of this article appeared in the Aug. 1 edition of The Villager.

This entry was posted in [Uncategorized](#) and tagged [East Village](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#) • [The Pictorico Theme](#).

◎ Follow

Follow “Lower Manhattan matters & adventures”

Build a website with WordPress.com