



## Two Croman tenants keep up their constant fight against landlord

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Cynthia Chaffee and her husband, Peter, inside their E. Sixth St. apartment, where she stores her voluminous files on her landlord, Steven Croman. Photo by Gerard Flynn

**BY GERARD FLYNN** | Mary Ann Miller, a host on WBAI radio, recently recalled an encounter she had this year with landlord Steven Croman's "private investigator" Anthony Falconite.

As she was coming down the stairs of her building on Prince St., Miller heard a terrible disturbance heading her way.

"Someone was pounding really heavy with the flat side of his fist yelling, 'I have to get in here. I'm an independent contractor. I have to check the plumbing,' " she recalled.

"My neighbors are Chinese and their English is very limited and were scared to death," she said. But Miller, whose tenant activism goes back to 1970, was not.

Falconite's job, she said, was to frighten tenants, then offer them a low amount of money to move.

"I said to him, 'What are you doing and why are you doing this?'"

The bulky ex-cop, when asked by Miller to produce credentials, refused, she said. Instead he turned around, "furiously yelling all the way down the stairs."

This alleged incident wasn't Falconite's first job for Croman, who is currently being probed by state Attorney General Eric Schneiderman's office, possibly for using illegal tactics to oust

tenants in rent-stabilized buildings. In July, the A.G.'s office slapped the Croman goon with a cease-and-desist order, and he "has now been assigned to desk duty," Miller chuckled.

"He did this to the elderly, mostly to people who couldn't speak English," she said. "He terrorized them."

Falconite has also been known to push the door open, force himself inside, then photograph everything around him.

According to a Croman spokesperson, Falconite denies ever having met Miller.

Miller was involved in the first Stop Croman Coalition, which died. Five years ago, its second incarnation was born when she was hosting a feminist program on WBAI and got a call from Cynthia Chaffee, another distressed tenant of Steve Croman.

Chaffee, who uses crutches, had been battling Croman in and out of Housing Court since he took over her rent-regulated apartment building on E. Sixth St. in May 1999, clearing out most regulated tenants in the process.

She's been to court with him eight times, alleging, among other things, a flood of water pouring down the ceiling light onto the front room floor, plus no heating or hot water.

"She wanted to restart the Stop Croman Coalition," Miller recalled. Despite their failing at first try to revive the group, the two women later met up with 70 Croman tenants on, of all days, July 14, Bastille Day.

"I thought it was a good day to begin a fight," Miller mused. But the momentum eventually slowed down as the "horrendous stories" of "aggressive harassment" began to build up: no heat or hot water, aggressive buyouts, etc.

"You name it he was doing it," Miller said.

But the coalition's second coming struggled with declining support from Croman's tenants. Chaffee and Miller, however, will never forget the efforts of state Senator Brad Hoylman and his predecessor, Tom Duane, whose work on their behalf they praised.

The Stop Croman Coalition recently made a third comeback. The group now numbers about two dozen dedicated members, with about half of them doing the demanding work of documenting harassment and identifying Croman's large property portfolio throughout the city.

The likelihood of their future success could hinge on the A.G.'s investigation. Both women have been visited by members of Schneiderman's office, which declined to discuss the ongoing investigation with The Villager.

Chaffee is currently in Housing Court with Croman.

Like Miller, she is not afraid to face down her deep-pocketed and well-connected foe. Croman is a philanthropist and Democratic Party donor.

"I have had open-heart surgery — that I am afraid of. But not Croman," she said. "He's a punk. With all my heart and soul, I will not stop until they put a stop to him because what he has done to people is horrible."

Driving around the city for years and researching online, they have compiled a list of his citywide portfolio, which at last count, numbers more than 180 buildings. Chaffee also boasts a room half filled with files on his properties.

Chaffee wants to know why Croman has for years been allowed to get work permits from the Department of Buildings, when for years he has owed the agency an allegedly huge sum in unpaid fines for violations.

Both women hope the attorney general's investigation will yield some results and perhaps even prison time for Croman. But they dismissed the recently amended Tenant Protection Act, co-sponsored by City Councilmember Margaret Chin and Jumaane Williams. Miller described the act as "timid." A \$10,000 fine, she said, is hardly a deterrent for the likes of Croman, a view some in legal services share.

"They don't pay their fines, now," Chaffee said. "He owes almost a million in fines, not including sanitation fines or tax liens. It's unbelievable."

Few landlords have been fined by Housing Court judges since the act was passed in 2008 — "possibly" 42 out of 3,200 cases brought by tenants, according to Department of Housing Preservation and Development records.

As a veteran of Housing Court, Chaffee said, "A court case drags on for more than a year because landlords want to wear tenants down emotionally and financially."

As if that wasn't enough, then "there is blacklisting," she said, referring to a disputed move by Housing Court, which places tenants' action in Housing Court on a nationwide database, thus affecting a prospective tenant's credit rating and likelihood of being offered another apartment.

On a final note, Chaffee described the case of another tenant of Croman’s, an elderly man living Uptown who, like her, had open-heart surgery.

“They knew he was sick and vulnerable and recuperating,” she said, adding they stopped depositing his rent checks.

After more than a year of threats of court action, “he caved in,” she said, leaving behind a potentially lucrative seven-room apartment, and is now a resident of the Salvation Army somewhere uptown.

In a statement, a spokesperson for 9300 Realty, Croman’s company, said: “We provide high-quality, reliable housing for New Yorkers and prioritize the safety and well-being of our tenants above all else. These two individuals are part of a small group of tenants who have a long history of litigation and making unfounded accusations about conditions in our buildings.

“It is our company policy to promptly address and make repairs wherever they are needed, or when requested. Our ratio of violations per unit is very low and the majority of the ones that remain open are due to the tenant’s refusal to grant us access to make repairs.

“We are proud of the work we have done to beautify and maintain our buildings, which include several historically significant properties in the Village and East Village.”

