

Tenants of 'worst building in Bronx' may soon get answer to prayers in form of new landlords

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Thursday, February 17th 2011, 4:00 AM



Harbus for News
Gladys Gonzalez points out cracked hallway at 1553 Bryant Ave., where she lives.

Gladys Gonzalez, a resident of 1553 Bryant Ave., prays each night that the ceiling in her bedroom does not collapse on her before morning.

"I'm afraid....I know the Lord is with me and I pray every night for him to watch over this building," said the 49-year-old Gonzalez.

"I know it's the only reason the place hasn't collapsed already."

Her prayers may finally have been answered.

The residents of "the worst building in the Bronx," with the most open housing code violations - 1,255 - may soon find an escape from the horror.

Two ex-Wall Street bankers have combined their savings with low-interest city and federal loans to buy the notorious address in Fairmont.

Craig Livingston and Mike Callaghan also purchased 1555 and 1558 Bryant Ave. and have vowed to deliver the three buildings' 300-plus tenants from their rat-infested, moldy and graffiti-covered digs.

"People shouldn't live this way in the greatest country in the greatest city in the world," said Livingston, of Connecticut, who formerly worked at Goldman Sachs. "I want to do something about it."

"No one five subway stops from Manhattan should be living in these conditions," added Callaghan, of New Jersey, and a former investment banker at JP Morgan Chase. "It's not right. The thing is a hellhole."

Heat and hot water are spotty, windows are dislodged from their frames, frigid air whistles eerily through apartments and city officials recently removed sheetrock containing lead.

"I hate living here," said Jennifer Santiago, 26.

In her two-bedroom, \$1,200-a-month apartment, makeshift wood beams hold up the hallway's ceiling, and Santiago says her cat fights a losing battle against mice and rats twice its size.

Santiago, Gonzalez and the rest of the residents of 1553 and 1555 Bryant Ave. will be moved by April to temporary housing, when Callaghan and Livingston's multimillion dollar, top-to-bottom renovation commences. Afterward, 1558 will be repaired.

A woman who answered the phone at the properties' former owner, Bronx-based Cherokee Partners, said the firm had nothing to do with 1553 Bryant Ave. anymore.

Cherokee Partners principal Alan Fein tops city Public Advocate Bill DeBlasio's "Worst Landlords in New York City" list.

Callaghan and Livingston bought the deeds from Cherokee for \$250,000 in November and the mortgage from Sovereign Bank for \$3.15 million. There are 99 units in all.

"[Callaghan and Livingston] are on the right path, and they have the tenants' interests at heart," said RuthAnne Visnauskas, associate commissioner for the Dept. of Housing Preservation and Development.

"We finally see a light at the end of the tunnel for these people. They deserve it. They have lived in deplorable conditions for too long," said Visnauskas.

"Thank God," said Gonzalez. "But I'll believe it when I see it."

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