



The Brown brothers are splitting their ribs laughing at Cleveland's Housing Court: Phillip Morris

Published: Friday, July 15, 2011, 5:10 AM



Phillip Morris, The Plain Dealer

By

CLEVELAND, Ohio — The Brown brothers, Graig and Derek, give new meaning to the expression "mean as a junkyard dog."

In a **disturbing story Wednesday**, Plain Dealer reporter Mark Gillispie used court documents and interviews with tenants to chronicle the antics of these two property owners who have crafted a

legendary reputation in low-income housing circles for abusing many of the tenants -- mostly single women with children -- who have the misfortune of living in their properties.



Graig Brown



Derek Brown

Here's how Cleveland Housing Court Judge Ray Pianka, one of the finest housing court judges you'll ever come across, describes the Browns:

"The court has never, in its 31-year history, heard proof in so many cases of a landlord or landlords engaging in such repeated, ongoing, deliberate, cruel, harmful and illegal conduct," Pianka wrote in a recent ruling when he awarded \$482,000 to Cindy Smith, a former tenant of the Browns.

Faced with a choice between living in a homeless shelter or going with the Browns, Smith chose the Browns' property -- which had already been condemned by the city.

Huge mistake. Less than a month later, she and her two young children were in a homeless shelter anyway.

When Smith fell five days behind on her rent after asking for an extension (she apparently wasn't a great tenant either), she returned to the home to find her water shut off and the next day, her power turned off.

Cleveland Public Power found that the electric meter had been removed and the breaker panel smeared with feces.

But determined to try to tough it out in these conditions, Smith came home a few days later to find the locks on the doors changed. She was forced to crawl through a window to retrieve a few personal items and her children's clothing.

She moved to a homeless shelter that day.

That wasn't the first or last time the Browns were accused of being rogue landlords. They have perfected the art of the quick, brutal and illegal eviction. In one case they were ordered to pay \$185,000 to a tenant who was locked out of her house, but not before someone went in and took one shoe from each pair owned by her and her children, poems written by the children, school art projects and family photos.

Now who does that?

Who steals a kid's shoes and a poem written for a mother?

There are some, no doubt, who might empathize with the Browns and their tactics. After all, the science of tenant selection often boils down to a crapshoot. A bad tenant is a nightmare.

Furthermore, it's often easy to demonize low-income renters, especially those who receive government-subsidized housing or housing vouchers, as being irresponsible leeches, unreliable tenants and destructive.

That mindset is what empowers a clever slum landlord, and there are quite a few in Greater Cleveland, to operate with great impunity as they trample on tenants' rights and eviction laws and disregard the safety of those living in their properties.

That is why a case like the Browns' is important to highlight. It serves as a reminder that irresponsible landlords are just as much a scourge on the area's degraded housing stock as are bad tenants.

The case also serves to signal the continued need for heavy scrutiny of those who take improper advantage of Section 8 largess -- both landlords and tenants.

Why, for instance, were the Browns still eligible for participation in the Section 8 program when they and their various corporate identities faced numerous foreclosure lawsuits? That's a red flag.

Also, why weren't they flagged for close watch given that both brothers had been indicted on multiple occasions on suspicion of disrupting public service (cutting off water and power) and burglary and aggravated theft (removing tenants' personal property).

The fact that they were not convicted on any of these criminal charges (impoverished tenants living out of homeless shelters are notoriously unreliable witnesses) is not good enough reason to continue to allow the Browns to peddle their slum housing at taxpayer expense.

Pianka has levied more than \$750,000 in civil judgements against the Browns in the last five years. Only one of the judgments has been successfully collected. That means the brothers are splitting their ribs laughing at the housing court.

It seems time for the tactic popularized by Joe Pesci in the movie "The Super."

It seems about time the Browns are forced to live in one of their own hellholes, without the luxury of running water or power. Perhaps, Pianka should also sentence them to some time walking around with only one shoe apiece.

Nothing else seems to be getting their attention.

To reach Phillip Morris: pfmorris@plaind.com, 216-999-5086

© 2011 cleveland.com. All rights reserved.