

Tenant/landlord dispute results in legal action

Rose Ray thought she had found her dream apartment. Located on Cleveland's east side, she was able to negotiate lease terms with the landlords that required her to pay a security deposit, along with monthly rent that was subsidized by the Housing Choice Voucher Program. She paid the security deposit, and moved in.

In a matter of months, her dream apartment became a nightmare. Due to some questionable calculations, the landlords repeatedly charged Rose late fees which over time added up. When she paid her rent each month, the landlords applied the rent to the late fees, so Rose was never really caught up. She woke up one morning to find she had no heat or electricity. She knew she'd paid her utility bills and had the documentation to prove it, and when she contacted the utility companies, was told they had not shut off her services. Rose later learned that her landlords had the ability to shut them off directly in the building.

Hoping to resolve the situation, but unable to stay in her apartment due to lack of heat, Rose went to stay with her mother. She returned to her apartment every few days to check on things, but one day, her key no longer worked. The landlords had changed the locks, keeping Rose out and unable to collect her personal belongings. Rose called the police, and she contacted The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland.

Founded in 1905, The Legal Aid Society (Legal Aid) of Cleveland has 53 attorneys on staff, and 1,700 more who volunteer their time to provide free legal assistance to low-income people with consumer, family, housing, health, education, work, and income and immigration problems in five Northeast Ohio counties. Legal Aid has been a United Way partner agency for more than 98 years, and today, funding from United Way helps support several Legal Aid programs including Legal Aid Services for Low Income Individuals.

Asking for help is

RIGHTS

Lawyer receives

At the time, Meldrum was

working for The Guardian, a

British newspaper. Mtetwa se-

cured a court order preventing

his deportation minutes before

he was to board a plane leaving

Meldrum, now the deputy

managing editor of the online in-

ternational news agency Global-

Post, will attend a symposium at

CWRU today and the ceremony

following it at Severance Hall,

that he was going to allow the

government to deport him but

that Mtetwa persuaded him to

challenge the case because it

could affect more than a million

others living in the county with

Mtetwa has also "rescued" for-

eign journalists like New York

Times reporter Barry Bearak,

who had been arrested and

charged under an obsolete law

In 2008, she represented jour-

nalists when President Robert

Mugabe's government was crack-

requiring press accreditation.

valid residential permits.

which is open to the public.

ethics award

FROM B1

the country.

Inamori Ethics Prize

The schedule today to celebrate the Inamori Ethics Prize: 12:30 p.m.: An academic symposium in the Inamori Center for Ethics and Excellence on the ground level of Crawford Hall, 10900 Euclid Ave. The event is free; however, seating is limited.

5:30 p.m.: Beatrice Mtetwa, the fourth Ethics Prize recipient, will be publicly honored at Severance Hall with the Inamori medal and monetary award. Following musical performances, the honoree will speak about her career.

The other recipients are: Stan Brock, founder of Remote Area Medical (2010); Mary Robinson, Ireland's first woman president (2009); and Frances Collins, geneticist and leader of the Human Genome Project (2008).

Benefactor: The prize was established with a gift from Kazuo Inamori, founder of Kyocera Corp. and Japanese telecommunications company KDDI.

ing down on them before an elec-Meldrum told event organizers tion.

Mtetwa said she often found herself urging people to defend their own rights for the betterment of others.

She recalled the case of a woman who had been accused by a relative during a family dispute of taking a small amount of money — less than a dollar. Police jailed her on Christmas Eve.

Mtetwa got the woman released the next day and then took her case all the way to the country's highest court – eventually winning



"I felt so strongly that it was an abuse of power on the part of the police," she said. "It was a very petty case and I thought that a law that allows people to be locked up like that in that situation was improper and unreasonable."

Mtetwa's principles have put her in danger in the past. She has been arrested and beaten by police on multiple occasions for her outspokenness. Her public stance on having an independent and impartial judiciary has not made arguing her cases any easier.

The mother of two said she was well primed to fight difficult battles as the eldest daughter in a large polygamous family, where she began challenging her father's rules at an early age.

Her defiance sometimes led to beatings.

"I didn't want to end up like one of my father's wives," she said. "I don't want this life for myself or for my siblings." Mtetwa said that all of her sisters became educated professionals.

Mtetwa said that in the past few years, despite being disliked, she has earned a measure of respect from many in the police forces.

Nowadays, she said, they don't slam doors in her face or threaten her. They mainly comply with her requests for information and quietly ask that she keep their names out of the newspapers.

But progress in pushing democratic ideals has been frustratingly slow and sometimes circuslike as government officials in Zimbabwe seem to be able to change long-standing laws based on their whim and will.

Other lawyers and activists have fled the country.

"Those fighting are fewer and fewer and some of the few left are fearful because they don't know what will happen to them.'

Despite the human-rights climate in Zimbabwe, Mtetwa has an optimistic outlook.

When asked what hopes she has for her country, she quickly rattled off this list: an impartial judiciary, a proper human rights commission and electoral body, a police force that understands it is not an extension of any political party and an independent attorney general.

"If we can get one or two of those things accomplished, the rest will start to fall into line, she said.





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half the battle

"Ms. Ray did everything right," said Howard Strain, Esq., a Legal Aid Society attorney. "It's very important to keep records of payment and receipts, and she did. There are ordinances that landlords must adhere to, and when Ms. Ray thought she was being taking advantage of, she did the right thing and came to Legal Aid for help.'

While it may be difficult for tenants to know what their legal rights are, Legal Aid attorneys and staff are willing and able to provide clarification. Legal Aid receives 110,000 calls for help annually, and has the capacity to help about 11,000 clients each year - which is why it is important to ensure there is a legal defense available to support the specific circumstances.

Following an initial intake session during which she completed a questionnaire and provided copies of her lease and records of payment, Legal Aid staff attorneys went to work on her behalf. Thanks to the legal assistance she received, her case went to Housing Court, and Rose was awarded damages, and the right to gain access to her apartment and remove her belongings. Legal Aid attorneys and staff also worked to help her secure new housing, and today she is happily settled in a new apartment, and working at a job she loves.

"Everyone at Legal Aid is so nice, from the intake people to the receptionists to the attorneys. They are all very discreet when it comes to handling difficult situations, and they treated me with complete respect - especially Jane Messmer, the attorney who worked directly with me. She was the biggest help of all," said Rose. "I strongly encourage people to come to Legal Aid for help."

About The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland

The mission of Legal Aid is to secure justice and resolve fundamental problems for those who are low income and vulnerable by providing high quality legal services and working for systemic solutions. To learn more about Legal Aid and services provided, call 216-687-1900 or 888-817-3777 (toll free) or log on to lasclev.org.

United Way of Greater Cleveland helps you help our community. To learn more about the 216 health and human services programs currently funded by United Way, log on to unitedwaycleveland.org or call 216-436-2100.

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