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**Twist in Eviction Fight: Charity as Landlord**

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At the Parkside, in Manhattan, many rooms are now empty, their doors marked with an X. The 17-story building was once home to hundreds of women.

For months, Princess Usanga, a sales assistant at a television station, has been embroiled in a particularly heated dispute with her landlord. She and other tenants took the owner of the Manhattan building where they live to State Supreme Court, hoping to block their eviction while the building is put up for sale.

In a city where landlord-tenant battles are all too common, this dispute is one of a kind, not so much because of the nature of the complaints but because of the identity of the owner: the [Salvation Army](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/s/salvation_army/index.html?inline=nyt-org).

The case has pitted a group of tenants from two of the few remaining women-only, single-room-occupancy buildings in Manhattan against one of the largest religious and charitable organizations in the world.

It has turned into an unusually public and messy battle for the Salvation Army, which has long operated the buildings, the Parkside Evangeline Residence for Young Women at 18 Gramercy Park South and the Ten Eyck-Troughton Residence at 145 East 39th Street, as safe and inexpensive havens for women.

The tenants of the two buildings, who have support from housing advocates and some city officials, started a blog at [salvationfromarmy.blogspot.com](http://salvationfromarmy.blogspot.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_) and even picketed outside the Salvation Army’s Spring Gala at the New York Hilton.

“The Salvation Army feels that they’re untouchable because of their reputation and their name,” said Ms. Usanga, 23, the president of the tenants’ association at the Parkside. “It just really upsets me. I expected more from them, and I can never look at them the same.”

Late last month, Justice Milton A. Tingling of the State Supreme Court in Manhattan rejected the tenants’ claims and ruled that the Salvation Army could terminate the leases because the buildings were operated for charitable purposes and were therefore exempt from the city’s rent stabilization laws.

“This court finds that at the time the Salvation Army made the decision to sell the residences and ordered the tenants to evacuate the premises within six months, the primary use of the buildings was charitable,” Justice Tingling wrote in his Aug. 20 decision.

In earlier statements about the case, the Salvation Army said it was selling the buildings because they had become too costly to maintain. The Parkside, with views of Gramercy Park, is expected to be turned into luxury condos. The Salvation Army has said money from the sale of the buildings will support its charity work for the needy and the elderly in the New York region.

The group also said it had helped most residents find housing in other Salvation Army buildings or at locations of their choosing, provided caseworkers to assist tenants and paid for moving costs in some cases.

The tenants and their attorneys are appealing Justice Tingling’s ruling, and the case is scheduled to be heard in November at the Appellate Division of State Supreme Court.

In the meantime, the two buildings remain ghostly shells. But even at their peak, when they housed 600 women, they were anachronisms in a city known for its fast-paced, ever-changing housing market.

The Ten Eyck has been owned and run by the Salvation Army since 1954, the Parkside since 1961. They were established as residences for working women of modest means. Over the years, the rents remained cheap for Manhattan, roughly $1,000 a month (including two meals daily), helping the buildings draw an eclectic mix of the young and the elderly, of working artists, young professionals and retirees.

Even today, the women are not allowed to have male visitors in their rooms. Meals are served in a downstairs dining room, and the buildings have been supervised over the years by Salvation Army officers with titles like major or brigadier.

Now, the few remaining tenants — about 30 women, most of them plaintiffs in the lawsuit — find themselves caught in housing limbo.

At the Parkside, Gisele Zelauy, 40, a writer from Brazil who is working on a novel, lives on the 12th floor in a 9-foot-wide, 15-foot-long room with a shared bathroom.

Only five other women live on the floor, and since one neighbor moved out, Ms. Zelauy has had the bathroom to herself. The 12th-floor hall is lined with doors that have been painted baby blue, with faded watercolor prints of birds on branches. On a recent visit, a cockroach darted under the closed door of Room 1205, which is empty and marked with a small black X.

Most of the doors are marked with X’s. “Like witch hunters,” said Ms. Zelauy, a plaintiff in the suit. “At night you only see a few window lights on.”

Sharon Gee, an artist, has called the Ten Eyck home for nearly 15 years. “There were church services on Sunday, Christmas parties, Fourth of July parties,” Ms. Gee said. “The majors were like our parents. You could go to them for advice, and they were there to protect you.”

After Justice Tingling’s decision, the Salvation Army began serving the tenants with eviction papers. The group was allowed to proceed with its eviction cases in Housing Court, but cannot execute any warrants of eviction — meaning that none of the plaintiffs can be forced out — until there is a ruling on the appeal. Earlier this year, the Salvation Army held off on proceeding with the eviction cases for plaintiffs and non-plaintiffs until Justice Tingling reached a decision.

Several tenants and their supporters said the plaintiffs had not been provided with adequate information or options for alternative housing. The people serving notices terminating their tenancy showed up at their doors with video cameras, the tenants said, a move that several of them regarded as an invasion of privacy.

The majority of residents, faced with uncertain living arrangements, left the two buildings because of the reduction of elevator, cleaning and other services, and some longtime residents were encouraged to move without being informed of their rights, according to the tenants’ court documents.

State Senator [Liz Krueger](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/k/liz_krueger/index.html?inline=nyt-per), a Manhattan Democrat, said she was disturbed by the Salvation Army’s actions, saying she found it hard to believe that the group had done everything it could to work with the tenants.

“Bad behavior by some landlords is unfortunately not new to me,” Ms. Krueger said. “The point here is the Salvation Army, the second-largest nonprofit in the country, that puts Santa Claus out on the street at Christmas, is not the group you expect to take the position, ‘This is just a real estate deal; these women have to go.’ ”

The Salvation Army did not immediately comment on the case for this article, but said in a statement early this year in response to criticism, “We will not battle this matter in the press, but will continue, through our actions, to show compassionate care for all.”

For the tenants, small details have made the buildings feel like home. And it is those losses that have been particularly disorienting.

Ms. Gee, one of the plaintiffs in the suit, now lives alone on the 12th floor. She said conditions at the Ten Eyck had deteriorated. Many in the cleaning staff were let go, she said, and some of her favorite dishes, like lamb shanks and broccoli with blanched almonds, disappeared from the menu and were replaced by canned and fried foods.

Relations between residents and the staff became strained, she said. On a recent visit, mouse droppings lined some of the rooms. Paint peeled from the ceilings, and the bathrooms smelled of urine. On one floor, the high-pitched beep of a smoke detector with a low battery echoed through the halls.

“It’s quiet, very dismal, lonely, sad and depressing,” Ms. Gee said. “And these are all the things that they want us to feel.”



 

Residents share a key to the park. Gisele Zelauy, left, is fighting her eviction from

 the Parkside, which overlooks Gramercy Park