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When a neighbor has a hoarder disorder

Sunday, December 17, 2006

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"Your room looks like the Collyer Brothers' house!"

Like many other baby boomers, I often heard that cleanup edict, which would have been a lot more effective had my mother told us how that duo ended up.

In 1947, reclusive Homer and Langley Collyer were found dead in their Harlem brownstone, amid 103 tons of junk, including 14 pianos and a Ford Model-T chassis. Langley had been crushed by floor-to-ceiling debris after triggering one of his booby traps as he crawled through a tunnel of newspapers. He'd been bringing food to the blind and paralyzed Homer -- who wound up starving to death.

Today, the brothers' disorder is known as compulsive hoarding, and it can be especially problematic in apartment buildings where space is tight, and shared. Compulsive cluttering has been associated with bug and vermin infestation, breathing problems, falls, and fire. In New York and other places on the East Coast, fire departments use "Collyers' Mansion" as a code for dangerously over-packed dwellings.

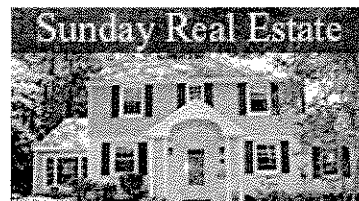
"If it's your own house, you basically can live in your own filth, so to speak, and we don't have jurisdiction," says Lt. Russell Shorter, fire official with the city of Hackensack. "But when you live in a building with 12 or 20 or 40 neighbors, the condition of your apartment affects the safety of everyone in the building ... and from that standpoint, we can make them clean it up."

In New York City, compulsive hoarding is such a problem that in 2003, a multidisciplinary Hoarding Task Force was formed to address this complex behavioral disorder.

"This whole thing is coming to light partly because building prices are going up. The person who pays \$4 million for an apartment isn't that keen on having 10 cats next door," says Kristin P. Bergfeld, a founding member of the NYC task force, and owner of Bergfeld's Estate Clearance Service. Most of her referrals for this kind of cleanup work come from building managers, judges, lawyers, social workers and hospitals, she says.

Eric Frizzell, a Glen Rock attorney whose firm, Buckalew Frizzell & Crevina, represents 125 condo and co-op associations, says that in New Jersey condo association documents contain standard restrictions that: prevent an owner from creating a nuisance or annoyance to other unit owners (say, conditions that invite roaches or vermin); prohibit owners from doing anything that could increase insurance premiums (for example, creating fire hazards); and say that unit owners are subject to all applicable ordinances or laws (which could allow the municipality to get involved).

Frizzell says associations first try to help the unit owner understand the need to resolve a problem. If that doesn't work, they seek get help from a family member, then social service agencies or even the local board of health. As a last resort, he says, the condo association can seek a court order allowing it to go in and clean



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Compulsive hoarding can be especially problematic in apartment buildings where space is tight, and shared.

up the unit, at the owner's expense.

With rental apartments, Bonnie Shapiro, administrative director of the New Jersey Tenants Organization, advises those dealing with a next-door hoarder to always start by talking to their neighbor about the problem. "You tell them how it's impinging on you and ask them to please do something," she says. "You give it a certain amount of time, and you ask them what they've done."

If the short answer is nothing, she advises writing a letter to the landlord, who will typically notify the neighbor there will be an inspection within 24 hours. The tenant will be given time to clean up any problem found. If it persists, the landlord may alert the authorities. Shapiro says her office usually hears from tenants who have received a warning from the health or fire department. "It's the same as any sickness. They really want to clean up, but they find it very, very difficult emotionally to do it," she says.

When does messiness cross the line into compulsive hoarding?

"Basically, the standard definition is that your living space cannot be used for its intended purpose -- and that takes most of us out of the loop," says Jill Cermele, chairwoman of the Psychology Department at Drew University in Madison.

Researchers say the problem can get more severe with age. There are several potential explanations for this, including dementia, downsizing of living space, or a Depression-era save-everything-mind-set, says Susan Hoskins, executive director of the Princeton Senior Resource Center, who pulled together a local coalition to deal with hoarding among seniors.

"We do find things that are really sad situations, where people have got so much stuff piled up that they can't sleep in their bed anymore. They're sleeping on a chair in the living room," says Hoskins. "Some of them feel the shame of what they're doing. So, when the plumbing breaks, they don't call someone to come in. There's so much stuff piled in the kitchen, they can't cook. They're opening a can of tuna fish in the living room in their chair, which is the center of their world," says Hoskins, adding that the hoarding often only comes to light after a crisis or medical emergency.

Bergfeld calls compulsive hoarding a "good instinct gone bad."

She remembers, for example, the kind-hearted Staten Island woman who had 100 cats she'd rescued or the "brilliant engineer" who had worked for a major transit company in the 1940s and '50s and filled his house with "fascinating mechanical things" (23 Dumpsters' worth) in case he ever needed to come to the rescue. The late homeowner had also booby-trapped the house to deter burglars.

"We couldn't get in without having pots and pans falling on our heads," recalls Bergfeld, who stresses that hoarders should never be thought of as cartoon characters. "We're dealing with a human being who incidentally has a lot of stuff."

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