

Getting the Needles Out of Watts Branch Park **11** Ryan Adams Plays Bono **44**

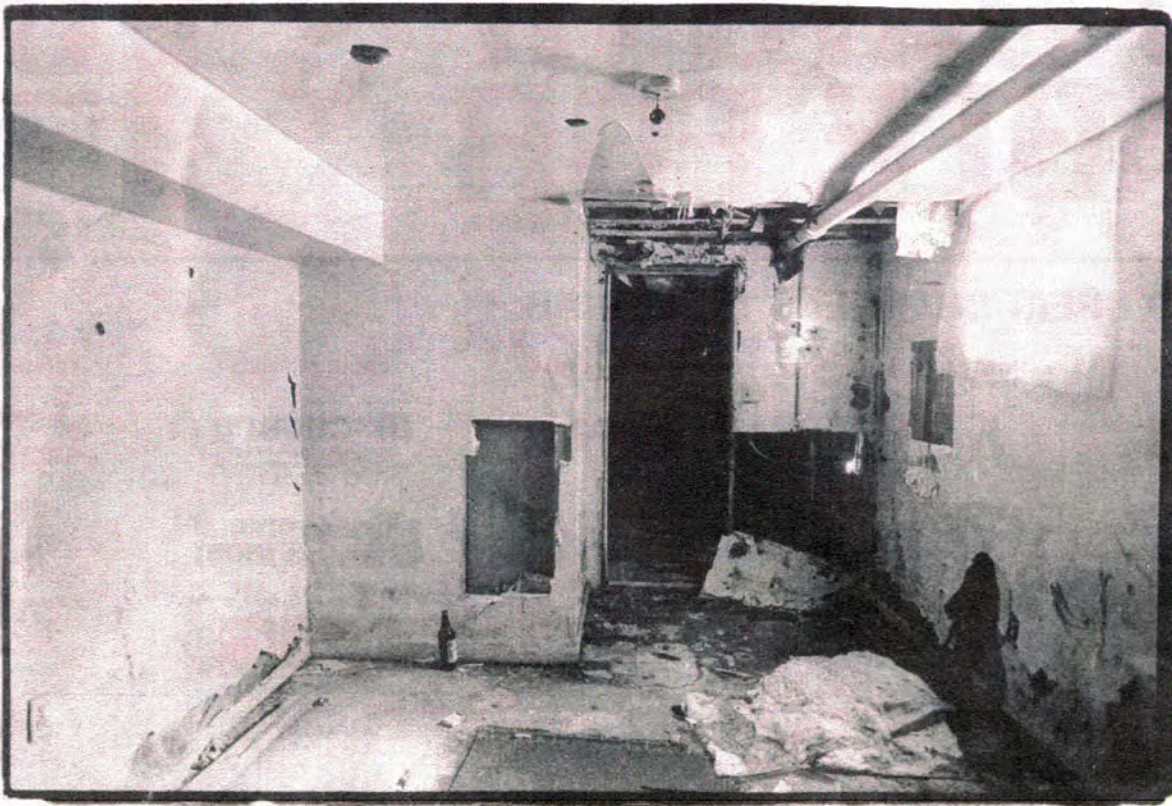
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Slum Kind of Wonderful



The city sees 2922 Sherman Ave. NW as a deathtrap.
Developers see it as an opportunity. Tenants see it as home. **20**

By Isaiah J. Poole
Photographs by Charles Steck

For nearly two decades, working-class tenants in a Columbia Heights building suffered through rats, water leaks, and a notorious slumlord. A deed transfer should eliminate all of the above.



Slum

Kind of Wonderful

By Isaiah J. Poole

Photographs by Charles Steck

The bathtub in Marsha Browne's apartment at 2922 Sherman Ave. NW is one of those old-fashioned, free-standing, claw-foot models, with a faucet shaped like an upside-down U.

As I look at it, I see myself as a young child sitting in a tub just like it in Apartment 107, two floors down, watching as the warm water rises to form my private little pond. My mother is nearby, making sure that I emerge from the bathtub well-scrubbed and that, as I get old enough to handle a can of cleanser and an old rag, the bathtub is well-scrubbed, as well.

Then I snap back to the present and peer behind Browne's now-antique tub, crowded

along the wall opposite the door to the tiny bathroom. I see a dark, corroded section of the wall in a corner close to the floor. Browne is describing how plumbing leaks were allowed to get so out of hand about three years ago that water flowed into the apartments below her, leaving a hole in the wall that became a passageway for rats. It's still there, in part because patching it would require removing the tub, a task that the landlord didn't see fit to do.

Back when I lived in this Columbia Heights building—from 1954 to 1964—figuring out how to fix that wall would have been the job of my father, Isaac F. Poole, who was the resident manager of 2922 Sherman Ave. But Browne





didn't have my father to call on. Instead, she and her fellow tenants had to depend on the responsiveness of Rufus Stancil, an upper-Northwest Washington property owner considered by many to be one of the city's most notorious slumlords—"one of the ultimate bad guys," as Ward 1 Councilmember Jim Graham puts it in a telephone interview.

It was on Stancil's watch that the building my father took care of fell into such disrepair that,

in March 2000, city authorities notified tenants that it was being closed and that they would have to vacate within 30 days. Conditions were bad enough, in fact, that a D.C. Superior Court judge in December 2001 not only sentenced Stancil to two weekends in jail, but also required him to live in the building for two weeks—in lieu of a potential sentence of 17 years in jail and about \$21,000 in fines.

When they saw the eviction notices, the


tenants—all low-income Latino residents except for Browne, who is black—were at first shocked. Then they mobilized to fight back. They solicited the help of the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, which filed suit against the District government and Stancil. And last year they put up a defiant banner: "The 2922 Sherman Ave. Tenants' Association Is Buying This Building."

That banner caught my eye this summer when I returned to Washington after a three-year stay in central Pennsylvania. Another thing I noticed was the number of houses within a block or two of the building that show signs of renovation—a reflection of Columbia Heights' status as the latest front in the city's gentrification struggle.

Those homes are in the process of being occupied by the new, financially successful pro-

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professionals Mayor Anthony A. Williams wants to attract to the city. It will be only a matter of time before 2922 is also spiffed up. The question is whether spiffing up is a prelude to moving out. The residents of 2922 are fighting to save the building in large part because of the decades of squalor and neglect they've already endured. And their story highlights one of the bigger questions the city has faced time after time: Is preserving a pocket of squalor the only way to keep working-class people in a gentrifying neighborhood?

You can tell a lot about a neighborhood by the cars parked on the block.

In 1960, on the 2900 block of Sherman Avenue, you would have seen an unremarkable collection of workmanlike Fords, Studebakers, Chevrolets, and the like. You might also have seen a Cadillac.

That car stood out not because it was spectacular—it was of '50s vintage and had lost a bit

walked up to the bus stop on Columbia Road to take the Westmoreland route into the neighborhoods west of Rock Creek Park, where wealthy homeowners employed them to clean their houses. At least as far back as the '30s, the neighborhood had been predominantly black.

The Douglass Apartments, as 2922 Sherman was called when it was built, fit the character of the area. Even today, if you stand outside it, you can get a sense of what the building was meant to be: a sturdy, utilitarian dwelling for renters on the lower rungs of the city's economy.

The building and its twin, the Moton Apartments at 2914 Sherman Ave., were built in 1925. The brick structures have a few modest architectural flourishes, the most obvious of which is the arch that frames the somewhat oddly placed main entrance of each building, at the top of a flight of stairs leading to the second floor.

On each floor of 2922, a straight, narrow, linoleum-tiled corridor connects the compact one- and two-bedroom apartments. Today, bare

covered that there was no listing for an Apartment 107 until my parents moved there. That a deal was struck with the building owner allowing my parents to carve out their own living space doesn't seem far-fetched.

The arrangement meant that I got a couple of special perks. For one thing, I got exclusive access to a narrow courtyard on the south side of the building. That courtyard is still barely visible from the street through a gate on the left side of the building. Today, three dumpsters block the path, and a wire mesh covers nearly all of the gate. Before the dumpsters and the mesh, it was just a door of iron bars, painted black, that separated me from the outside world. The occasional classmate from the old Monroe Elementary School on Columbia Road would see me peering through the bars and call the space "the jail." But because we had the courtyard, we could also have Sandy, a friendly dog of uncertain breed who kept us company. The end of the courtyard was Sandy's

There was also a dusty—and for me, rather scary—storage room. Unlike the linoleum-covered floors of the rest of the apartment, the concrete floor here was bare. A small mouse had died in a corner of that room, and for some reason its carcass had never been removed. By the time I encountered it, all that was left was a set of skeletal remains. The mouse skeleton gave me nightmares. I didn't play in that room very often.

In 1963, my father began feeling the full effects of the lung cancer that would kill him; a pack-a-day cigarette habit, the conditions in the bus garage, and the daily exposure to coal dust proved to be a fatal triple whammy. During the final months of his life, when he was too sick to keep up with the work at 2922 Sherman, Harrison & Adams arranged for us to move to an apartment on Minnesota Avenue NE. Families with children weren't supposed to be in that building—such restrictions were common before the '70s—but the assessment of the people who ran the management office

"The hot water was leaking," says tenant Marsha Browne. "I called them, you know; probably it was the washer. They didn't send anyone. This went on for—I'm not exaggerating—four years. First it was just dripping. Then it was a stream. Then it just started running."

of its luster by the time I took note of it—but because of the steadfast way its owner moved the car by 4 p.m., the onset of the evening rush hour, when northbound Sherman Avenue became a high-speed pathway for commuters headed for homes uptown and in suburban Maryland, and returned it within a few ticks of 6:30 p.m., the official end of rush hour.

The daily Cadillac move said a lot about this section of Columbia Heights. It was a stable, steady neighborhood, its rhythms rarely interrupted, populated by a fertile mix of striving renters and working-class homeowners. It was not ostentatious, but if after years of hard work you could get a Cadillac, even used, well, you did.

There were a lot of two-income families. In the '50s, one-fourth of the working men in the neighborhood were classified as laborers, another one out of six were "operatives or kindred workers"—basically mechanical workers and assistants—and another one out of eight were service workers. Nearly half the women were household workers; many of them probably

fluorescent lighting casts a harsh light on the two-tone green-and-pink paint job in the hallways.

My parents moved into 2922 sometime in the late '40s. The move thrust my father into double duty: By day, he worked as a bus mechanic with D.C. Transit Co. In the evening, when most others were kicking back, he worked for Harrison & Adams, the company that managed 2922, handling the maintenance chores that came with what was then an 18-unit building. Either before or after work, my father stayed busy shoveling massive amounts of coal into the building's furnace, collecting the building's trash, and burning that, as well. He also responded to the occasional call to replace a faucet washer, a light bulb, or a fuse.

I remember my mother, Myrtle Poole, telling me that before they moved into the building, the space that became Apartment 107 had dirt floors, that it was my father who laid the floors there. As an adult, I began to doubt the truth of that statement. Then I looked at old Polk directory listings of the building's tenants—and dis-

equivalent of a litter box, so I had to draw my play boundaries accordingly. My father sprinkled powdered lime on that part of the yard to break down the feces.

Besides its single bedroom, combined living and dining room, bathroom, and kitchen, Apartment 107 had its own laundry room. Later, it would become the laundry room for the entire building. When I lived there, my mother used it to do the family laundry on a wringer washing machine—the kind with the round tub and two wooden cylinders the size of large rolling pins that were used to wring out the clothes. It was also the place where my father kept the tools he needed to fix things in the building. A metal toolbox contained a mess of washers, screws, nails, and miscellaneous small tools; he found himself rooting through that toolbox a couple of times a week. I would stand over him and watch, and he would turn to me, annoyed, and say, "Get out of my light!" But he didn't mind if later I rooted through the toolbox myself and familiarized myself with its contents.

was that I was a good kid who wouldn't destroy the property.

And that perhaps summed up all you need to know about Harrison & Adams. Paternalistic, yes; not exactly civil-rights crusaders in rental practices, certainly; but overall, as landlords go, pretty decent to work with.

Marsha Browne also found Harrison & Adams to be a decent landlord when she moved into 2922 Sherman Ave., in 1971—at least compared with what was to come later.

Browne is now a retired widow. On a recent October afternoon, she wears a faded blouse printed with passport stamps heralding various world destinations. Her gray-and-black hair is pulled tightly back. Because she is treasurer of the tenants' association, her apartment is a hub of activity, and she is, in a motherly sort of way, always on alert, ready to juggle a domestic task and the requests of a sudden visitor. She speaks at a measured pace, occasionally straining to

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Rufus Stancil

"I called [landlord Rufus Stancil] up and welcomed him as a new owner," says Browne. She then lets out a sarcastic chuckle.

"Ohhh, my gosh."

properly place in time the stream of hardships she has endured.

Back when she settled into her third-floor apartment, she was a 21-year-old native Washingtonian striking out on her own. At the time, she was working with her mother, who had a job cleaning offices downtown. Later, she got a job as a typist for the Department of Housing and Urban Development. It was within easy reach of her apartment: a one-block walk to Georgia Avenue to catch the southbound 70. In time, she would marry Frank Browne Jr. and raise five children.

Conditions at the building remained solid through the mid-'80s, even as it underwent various management changes. Then, in 1986, the tenants received notice that the building was on the market. The notice, as required by District law, said that the tenants had the first right to make a purchase offer. "We didn't get into that, because we didn't know what to do, how to go about it," Browne says. "Next thing we knew, we got a letter that Stancil had bought the building."

Browne took it upon herself to make a courtesy phone call to Stancil after he took possession of the building, in July 1986.

"I called him up and welcomed him as a new owner," Browne says. She then lets out a sarcastic chuckle. "Ohhh, my gosh."

Stancil had purchased a building in which the tenant population was undergoing a fundamental change, as was the surrounding neighborhood.

When Browne moved in, all of the tenants were black Americans except for the Banishayes, on the third floor. They were black Africans—Browne doesn't remember from what country. After Stancil purchased the build-

ing, tenants named Adams and Butler and Reid and Thompson were gradually replaced by tenants named Aviles and Bonilla and Rogelio and Torres. Eventually, Browne and her family were the only non-Latino tenants left. And Browne was the only adult fluent in English.

In fact, the 2000 census says that 52 percent of the residents on the block are Latinos of various races. Forty-one percent of the block's residents are black. During the years I grew up on that same block, census figures say, all, or nearly all, of its residents were black.

In one important respect, though, the community hasn't changed that much. The area has a somewhat larger percentage of wealthier people than it did 50 years ago, but the backbone of the community along Sherman Avenue is still blue-collar. Almost a third of the workers are in sales or office occupations, and another 28 percent are in service positions, according to the 2000 census.

But by the time Stancil came on the scene, the black tenants of 2922 had options. They could choose not to deal with the decaying condition of the building. So when water leaks sprouted in the building, door locks stopped working, and the lack of hot water forced tenants to boil water for months, they left, one by one. "When things broke down, they couldn't get anything done," Browne says.

Not even the resident manager who lived in the building could get an apparent plumbing leak in his apartment fixed. The leak was causing water to seep through a wall and onto the floor. "I remember when I visited his apartment, I was saying how nice he kept his apartment, and he said, 'You just don't know the problems I've been dealing with,'" says Browne. He left, too.

Browne's problems were all too typical. "The hot water was leaking," she says. "I called them, you know; probably it was the washer. They didn't send anyone. This went on for—I'm not exaggerating—four years. First it was just dripping. Then it was a stream. Then it just started running."

"Someone across the hall had a plumbing problem in their kitchen, which was probably connected to mine," she continues. "So they had to come over here to look at my situation to deal with that. And that's the only way that got fixed."

Browne's front door was another chronic problem: It refused to open smoothly from the inside. It took a strong pull for an adult to get it open, and a child couldn't open it at all—a seri-



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The author in his former home

ous problem if an emergency required a hasty exit. Getting it fixed took a year of complaints and a personal visit from Stancil, Browne says.

"Mr. Stancil ended up coming to check out the door," she says. "He had a hard time—but he's a man, you know—and he had to yank it

open. So this went on and on until finally he did send someone to fix the door."

The conditions prompted Browne to consider moving out of 2922, and at one point she had an apartment lined up in Southeast. "And I said I would never live in Southeast," she says. But

then, "by the time Stancil took over the building, I had already been here a while, and it was home. I just had hoped that things would get better."

Conditions in the building continued their decline, though. For Browne, the low point was the day the bathroom flooded.

Make that the week the bathroom flooded. "In my bathroom, the toilet was leaking, the sink was leaking, and the tub was leaking. Everything was leaking at one time," Browne recalls. "So I called Stancil and I told him what was happening, and he said he would send somebody out. Maybe five days later, somebody came out. But in the meantime, I was steadily mopping water. Everything was leaking so bad that the tenants directly under me, even the people in the basement apartment, were knocking on my door saying that water was running into their apartment. And I couldn't tell them because I didn't speak Spanish."

Continues Browne: "I was on the phone talking to Mr. Stancil. I was calling my family, because water is steadily running all over the place. I was steadily trying to mop it up, putting newspaper down."

The leaking water left the hole in the wall behind the bathtub, Browne says. And then the rats came. There had been occasional sightings of mice inside the building, as well as rats outside feasting on the trash, which was not collected on a regular basis, Browne says. But, she insists, "I had never seen a rat in here.... In fact, it was my son [who was 15 at the time] who saw it first. It made nervous wrecks out of all of us."

In one instance described by activists working with the tenants, a pregnant woman in a second-floor apartment did not have a usable bathroom for three months. She had to use the bathrooms of her neighbors until a social worker was able to get her into another apartment building.

Nor has Apartment 107 escaped the neglect of the Stancil era. There is almost no sign of the kitchen where my mother fried chicken nearly every Sunday. No sign of the bathroom, either: no tub, no sink, no toilet. The shape of the combination living and dining room, where I would crawl under the table to



Isabel Moreno

watch our black-and-white TV, can still be made out. So can the bedroom. But it's hard to imagine any of this mess once being a cozy, comfortable place.

It's the same with all four of the ground-floor units, which show signs of vandalism and squat-

ter incursions. Doors are unhinged, a bathtub is left on its side in one unit, sinks and other fixtures are missing, and decay is everywhere.

The yard I played in is a mess of weeds and trash. The concrete walkway I once used as a freeway for toy buses and trucks is badly

crumpled and partly obscured by dirt and weeds. I once chased fireflies in the twilight here; today, no civilized parent would let a child set foot in this space.

In the boiler room, the big coal furnace has been replaced by a more compact, oil-fired unit,

and a squadron of water heaters soldiers on in the dark, wet conditions. The gate through which I would watch life parade by on Sherman Avenue is rusty, its black paint peeling; a chain holds the misaligned gate locked.

Browne says she and the other tenants will venture downstairs only if a problem such as a tripped circuit breaker requires it. Otherwise, she says, "I won't go down there.... It's too depressing."

She's right. It is.

The week before Christmas 1999, Browne was painting her apartment when there was a knock on the door. It was an inspector from the city's Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA). That was strange, she thought, because an inspector hadn't been in the building in years. Then, nothing much happened before the inspector returned Feb. 24 to look at the building again.

Two weeks later, DCRA employees posted notices in the building and, for good measure, distributed them to each apartment. The English version read, in part, "This Structure is Declared Unfit for Human Habitation and its Occupancy And/or Use Is Hereby Prohibited." Tenants had until April 10, 2000, to leave the building unless by some extraordinary effort Stancil corrected the violations.

The DCRA reinspection report said that 27 "emergency violations" had been found in December, and 15 remained unaddressed on Feb. 24. There were also 328 "routine violations."

"My immediate reaction was that I was devastated, and I was angry at Stancil," Browne says.

The anger, in fact, was building-wide. It didn't help, according to the housing activists who worked with the Latino tenants, that the poorly translated Spanish-language version

of the notice erroneously implied that the evictions were immediate and that the tenants were responsible for repairing the building, not the landlord.

Some of the Latino tenants called the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN). Saul Solorzano, the group's executive director, called city officials and was at least able to get the Spanish-language version of the letter rewritten. But the tenants still had to move.

2922 Sherman Ave. was one of the properties listed on a March 14, 2000, press release from the mayor's office headlined, "Mayor Takes Action Against Negligent Landlords." The press release included the addresses of 32 "substandard properties"—the so-called hot properties list. Among those, 2922 and six other buildings were singled out as representing "some of the most dangerous and unsanitary conditions in the city."

Raul Rodriguez, a CARECEN community organizer, visited 2922 shortly after the DCRA notices were posted. He was infuriated by what he saw. "There was filth in the basement. There was filth in the main floor. There was garbage in front of the building piled up," Rodriguez says. "There were old mattresses, broken chairs and sofas. And there were a whole bunch of rats. The building was infested with roaches and everything. The air that you breathed was very thick and heavy, and in order to keep from getting sick people had to come out and breathe. It was very hard conditions for people."

The activists who began working with the Sherman Avenue tenants found it galling that the city didn't take a more humane approach to the crisis. The District, for example, could have chosen to fix the most serious code violations at the buildings it cited, then place liens on the properties. That would have been one way to punish the landlords without subjecting the tenants to imminent eviction.

Even Bernard Gray Sr., the lawyer representing Stancil, says the fix-it-and-lien-it approach would have been the preferred method for dealing with 2922 Sherman Ave. "If you wanted to help the tenants, you can't put them out," says Gray. "What they should have done, if anything, is go in, repair the building, and charge it as a tax lien."

Stancil, reached by phone at his upper-Northwest home, refused to answer questions for this story. But Gray says that cash-flow problems created when tenants withheld rent payments prevented Stancil from repairing the problems that the tenants were protesting by withholding their rent.

Lawyers at the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs say that the officials have been told by District officials that they had been trying to work behind the scenes with the landlords to get the problems fixed, and condemned the buildings only when those efforts failed. But city officials have refused to submit any documentation of those efforts in response to the lawsuit.

City officials have also refused to comment on the specifics of the hot-properties closings to the *Washington City Paper*, citing the pending litigation. Chris Bender, a spokesperson for the DCRA, says housing inspectors have broad discretion on whether a set of code violations warrants imminent closure of a building. But if there is a building closure, there is no formal process for connecting tenants with assistance, either from other District agencies or elsewhere, in obtaining alternative housing. The agency offers information to displaced tenants, but "it's up to the tenants" to figure out what to do, Bender says.

The mayor's office identified 2922 Sherman Ave. NW and six other buildings as representing "some of the most dangerous and unsanitary conditions in the city."

At 2922, the tenants started packing. But they also started meeting in the building's second-floor hallway. Often, a staff member of CARECEN or another community organization would act as translator. When an outside activist wasn't around, one of the children in the building would translate.

"The thing was that the tenants there at the time, they actually didn't know what to do," Rodriguez says. Because the Spanish-language version of the city's letter seemed to hold the tenants responsible for the building's condition, Rodriguez asked if the tenants had in fact created the problem. "And they said, 'No, no, no, the owner has a manager who is supposed to take out the garbage and was supposed to be in charge of building maintenance.'" That work wasn't being done, the tenants alleged, "but Mr. Rufus Stancil was still coming once a month to collect the rent."

Meanwhile, a janitor hired by Stancil was suddenly more active in the building, making what were mainly cosmetic fixes. Tenants grew concerned that Stancil might be using the janitor as a spy.

"I knew it was awkward for all of us to meet in the hallway, and I knew my kitchen was large enough, and I just thought, *You know, shoot, we could start having meetings here.* And I brought it up, and that's how that began," Browne says.

Browne's "large enough" kitchen is painted yellow and has just enough room for some appliances and a table that could cozily fit six people. As tenants crammed into that kitchen for meetings, emotions ran high, Browne says. "Everybody talked at one time, all loud. I didn't know what they were saying," she recalls, laughing. "But it was nothing that got out of hand. It was just everybody trying to make their point."

The tenants debated their options. They could simply comply with the city's order and move out. But they didn't feel that they had anyplace else to go; they were accustomed to paying rents averaging \$400 a month. Browne, as the building's longest-running tenant, was paying \$271 a month because of the city's rent-control law. They were not likely to find apartments with comparable rents nearby, so they would have to leave Columbia Heights and the support system that was evolving around them. The parents in the building were especially upset that they would have to uproot their children from their classes late in the school year.

Residents didn't have much hope that Stancil and the city would come to an agreement under which the owner would fix the emergency violations, the city would rescind its eviction order, and the tenants could continue as renters. And they feared that if they left the building to allow Stancil to make major repairs, they would not be able to return.

Another option was to buy the building. The tenants and CARECEN staff members discussed the pros and cons. But there wasn't much debate, according to participants in the meetings. When it was time to decide whether the tenants should form an association and attempt to buy the building, "it was unanimous," Browne says.

Similar highly charged discussions were taking place in the other Columbia Heights buildings that the District government attempted to close in March 2000: 1458 Columbia Road, 739 Newton Place, 1418 W St., and 1430 W St. And it was apparent that no one was buying the District government's characterization of the "hot-properties" offensive as an effort to help poor tenants by cracking down on the city's worst buildings.

Was it mere coincidence, they asked, that 22 of the 32 addresses singled out as "substandard properties" were in Columbia Heights, Cardozo/Shaw, or Mount Pleasant? And that those buildings were located in census tracts where the Latino population ranged from 16 percent (around 2922 Sherman Ave.) to over 50 percent (in the area of the Columbia Road building)? And that five of the seven buildings the District sought to close were within walking distance of the brand-new Columbia Heights Metro station?

The tenants and the housing activists who worked with them saw collusion between the District government and the building owners to clear low-income Latinos out of properties that could then be redeveloped into chic housing for high-income professionals.

According to Solorzano, it was this anger that prompted the affected tenants' associations to sue the city with the help of the Lawyers' Committee. Their suit cites "selective and discriminatory enforcement of [the city's] housing code by threatening to close and barricade, and by closing and barricading, apartment buildings with predominately Hispanic and Vietnamese tenants in the Columbia Heights area." The 2922 tenants, working with CARECEN, joined the lawsuit.

The tenants elected Isabel Moreno as their president. Moreno, an older man with a friendly but serious demeanor, moved to the United States from El Salvador 17 years ago. He used to work in construction, but a minor stroke left him disabled—and with plenty of time to do some of the work involved with the tenants' association. "I did not offer myself. I always thought I was the new kid in town," Moreno says matter-of-factly in Spanish. "Some of them thought I should do this job."

Late in the summer of 2002, Moreno and some of the other residents at 2922 agreed that it was time for the tenants' association to make a bold, public statement.

"The next thing I know, Mr. Moreno came in here with that banner," Browne says, referring to the banner now outside the building. "The lettering was already on it. We spread it across the dining-room table, and he and I started painting it, along with my granddaughter."

"One of the reasons we put that banner out there was because we want everybody to know that we are committed to buying this building," says Mario Cristaldo, a community organizer with Manna Inc., a nonprofit housing organization for low-income families, "and we wanted to scare off some of the other developers who might be interested in buying."

Tammy Seltzer, one of the lawyers working with the Sherman Avenue tenants, lives a

short walk away on Lamont Street. From the very beginning, when she heard of the eviction notices, she says, she thought that "this whole thing smelled bad." She would be astonished at just how bad 2922 was once she entered the building for the first time, in 2000, "but I was immediately amazed by the tenants, who were adamant about remaining in the building."

Stancil filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy protection in the spring of 2003. A few weeks ago, a deal that would transfer title from a U.S. Bankruptcy Court trustee to the tenants was completed by Manna Inc. for presentation to the trustee. (The building is assessed at \$319,770.) Financing is being arranged through the Local Initiatives Support Corp., a New York-based organization that raises funds and invests them in inner-city affordable-housing initiatives and other redevelopment projects. An unspecified amount of money saved by the tenants themselves will serve as a down payment.

The deal is awaiting approval by the bankruptcy trustee. "We feel we're really close to achieving something that any human being would wish for: to become a homeowner," says Moreno.

If title is transferred to the tenants, D.C.'s Department of Housing and Community Development will give \$900,000 toward a rehabilitation that is expected to cost \$1.5 million, says Cristaldo. The plan is to temporarily relocate the tenants, gut the building, and when renovations are complete, have the tenants operate the place as a cooperative.

But the U.S. Bankruptcy Court is not bound by the D.C. laws that give preference to a viable offer from tenants to purchase the building they live in, Webster explains. A developer could still decide to play Scrooge and outbid the tenants' association. And it is not clear when the court will decide if the tenants' offer will prevail.

Even less certain is the fate of the Lawyers' Committee lawsuit. It was supposed to go to trial on Nov. 4 after months of delays, but the District won a request for more time to prepare its defense. The committee's lawyers, who have filed several sharply worded responses to previous delays caused by the city, are steamed by the latest roadblock.

"I'm frustrated myself, you know—it's dragging on and on and on," Browne says. "But I also know how court issues are. It just takes time. And like I tell the tenants and translators, we've hung in there this long, and we voted to try to buy the building. It's taking a while, but we can hang in there a little bit more."

Near the end of the interview, Browne walks over to a stack of boxes in her bedroom. A few of those boxes were packed in March 2000 and never unpacked when the threat of imminent eviction receded. She says she has been gradually packing ever since, but lately it has been more out of anticipation than urgency.

For me, the proposed renovation means that the claw-foot bathtub will be gone, as will the old gas stove, the linoleum floors, and the other familiar sights of my childhood. For the tenants who want the same thing that the tenants my father served wanted—a decent place to come home to after working hard for not much pay—it's good to let go.

"I would love, when we have to move out for renovations, to be able to come back here, to live back here, just to see the newness of everything," Browne says, her voice rising with excitement. She laughs. "I think I owe that to myself." **CP**

Tenants feared that if they left the building to allow Stancil to make major repairs, they would not be able to return.