

Tenant fights off eviction

But other families have been forced out by landlord

BY ELIZABETH HAYS

THE KITCHEN ceiling in Maricela Bitar's apartment fell in and the aging floor is buckling, but the disabled Sunset Park grandmother considers herself lucky.

At least she still has an apartment she can afford.

Bitar, 59, who has a housing voucher and pays \$131 a month, recently beat a baseless eviction attempt brought by her landlord — but advocates charge that scores of other families in nearby rent-regulated buildings have been forced out.

"If she didn't have family, she would be out, too," said Bitar's daughter, Nadia Maylou, 34, who fought back when her mom got the papers in May telling her she had 30 days to leave the 48th St. apartment where she has lived for 16 years. "He wants everybody out so he can make more money."

Advocates charge that since buying nine regulated buildings last year, landlord Jack Geula has sought to force out longtime low-income tenants through legal challenges and by failing to make repairs.

Last week, tenants and activists from Neighbors Helping Neighbors protested outside the offices of Geula's lawyer, Samuel Hagan.

"It's so transparent what the landlord is doing," said South Brooklyn Legal Services lawyer Wendy Walker, who won Bitar's case and a similar one brought against another elderly tenant.

Walker said that in both instances, Geula suddenly agreed to drop suits instead of going before a judge, and even agreed to pay each woman \$1,000 in sanctions for bringing the baseless eviction actions.

"He basically represents gentrification at its worst," said Walker.

Geula insisted he has done nothing wrong. "This is New York City. There are laws and rules to everything that everyone must obey, including me."

Hagan did not return a call for comment.

A longtime tenant in another of Geula's buildings said that since Geula bought the building last year, the heat and hot water goes off sometimes for days at a time, and that recently, the ceiling recently caved in above his baby's crib.

"When I told him, he said, 'If you don't like it you can move,'" said the tenant.

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Maricela Bitar and daughter Nadia Maylou examine sagging floor. Photo by Ken Murray

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