

I Used to Shake My Fist at Injustice, Now I Organize

Judy Burnette

BEFORE YOU READ: Discuss the title. What does it tell you about what this article is about?

They Tried to Evict Us

I have seen a lot of injustice in my life. I read a lot and I understand there is a lot of greed in the world. But it wasn't until an order of nuns and a big real estate company tried to evict me from my home that I learned how to fight back.

In 2008, I was living in Our Lady's Guild House (OLGH). The rooms were affordable and modest, and there was a feeling of community. There were five floors of single rooms for nuns, low- and moderate-income women, and retired

women. There were kitchens on three floors. Some women put their money together and cooked together and ate together.

The building is owned by The Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception. In 2012, a new nun

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took over. She called herself Mother General. She brought in a new on-site manager, who immediately started intimidating everyone. No one felt comfortable in the common spaces. It seemed as



Judy Burnette at a protest in front of her apartment building. Photo by Marilyn Humphries.

though her purpose was to destroy the peace and harmony that this diverse and cordial community of women used to enjoy.

Soon after the new manager was hired, OLGH announced that everyone's rent would go up \$100 per month. This was too much for a lot of the women. Some of the women tried to form a residents association. Their aim was to push back the rent increase. But whenever they met, the new manager would interfere and try to intimidate them. The leaders of the resident association were identified and given eviction notices. The on-site manager was so threatening, people stopped eating together. Instead, they stayed in their private rooms.

Meanwhile, the Mother General formed an unholy alliance with Marc Roos Realtor to abandon the charitable mission of OLGH, drive out long-term residents, and turn the building into a profit-making AirBnB. They even posted on their website that the building was for "professional women" and "women under 50" – clear discrimination, which is against the law. In 2014, we were

informed that, starting in 2018, they would no longer be renewing leases. So people gradually left.

I knew that as an African American single woman living on a fixed income, I was not going to find an apartment that I could afford in Boston. A small group of OLGH women started coming to City Life/Vida Urbana (CLVU) meetings. We also held meetings in one of the common spaces at OLGH. People came. Once management noticed where we were meeting, they closed that room and said it was “under construction.” Not a thing has happened in that room. It’s still closed, and it is still under construction.

We Fought Back

When our eviction date rolled around, we decided not to leave. We had nowhere to go. This was our home. And we hadn’t done anything wrong. They just wanted to get rid of us and move in higher-paying tenants. Just because you get older doesn’t mean you have to step to the side. I’ve worked hard, I’ve played by the rules, and here I am as an older person getting kicked out. And I thought to myself, “Oh no you don’t!”

When I told my sister about this, she sort of shrugged, and said, “Well, there’s nothing you can do.” She wanted to know how I managed to get into this fix. That’s what a lot of people do. They blame you. Everyone assumes it’s your fault.

At City Life, we learned we could fight the eviction, and we realized we were not alone. Lots of other tenants in the city were fighting to stay in their homes and to keep affordable rents. In August 2018, we held a rally in front of Marc Roos’s office on Commonwealth Avenue. We raised hell! We had a petition that had been signed by 1000 people. They wouldn’t open the door, so we slid all the pages under their door.

This rally was so inspiring for me. I was so surprised to see all these people from CLVU come out and support us. They were holding signs and chanting. “Marc Roos, you can’t hide. We can see your greedy side.” I think it surprised the hell out of him.

CLVU takes public action. We do not plot

behind the scenes to solve a problem. It scares the owners and the real estate companies because they aren’t used to people fighting back. They don’t know how to handle it.

Some of the OLGH women felt like victims. Once you feel like a victim, your energy is gone. CLVU says, “You have power.” We offer strategies for how to fight

back. We have free lawyers and a movement of people who are fighting for the same thing. Most importantly, City Life takes a moral stand: that housing is a human right.

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This Is How It Changed Me

I was not involved in the civil rights movement. I’m shy. I’m from a small town in New Jersey. I never imagined myself standing in front of people and talking about these issues. But now I speak in front of City Life meetings and at rallies. I’m having my first real experiences of solidarity, and so my response to injustice is completely different than it used to be.

Recently, I read that the federal government is cutting off food stamps to 750,000 people. In the past, I would be shaking my fist in anger at all the injustices in the world, but I wouldn’t know what to do. Now I do. Now I understand solidarity. I know that by organizing people, we have power, and we can do something about it.

And now my sister is spreading the word about City Life.

Judy Burnette now works at City Life/Vida Urbana. She is helping to organize a citywide Tenant Association made up of Section 8 tenants to help them fight for their rights.

AFTER YOU READ: Describe in your own words the change that the author experiences. What form of power does she discover? Have you ever witnessed or experienced similar forms of solidarity?