

Blind Faith



"Every time he's been here in the past eight months, it's been false promises," says Jackson of his landlord. "When I complained, he said, 'If you don't like it, move.'"

When Marion Jackson was 26 years old, he got into a fight with his best friend. It began with shouting, punching and punishing blows. It ended when his friend returned with a loaded gun and shot him twice in the back of the head.

Jackson lost his left eye completely, and most of the vision in his right. Additional nerve damage causes his facial muscles to twitch and twist involuntarily, pulling his mouth and forehead into exaggerated expressions. It's a dramatic disability. Jackson is unable to see, unable to work. He survives on \$601 a month in Social Security disability payments, but for most of the 22 years since the incident, he has barely gotten by.

Eight months ago, Jackson was homeless, sleeping on a friend's stoop. Another friend intervened, asking downtown landlord Earl Alexander if he'd help Jackson out. Alexander manages five properties owned by his family in the Springfield area, including a two-story house at 1071 E. 12th Street, near Talleyrand. He offered to rent it to Jackson for \$450 a month, utilities included. To seal the deal, Jackson and Alexander took the typical landlord/tenant tour of the place. According to Jackson, the place seemed fine. Of course, he couldn't see it.

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BY SUSAN COOPER EASTMAN
PHOTOS BY WALTER COKER

the toilets, sewage backed up into the upstairs bathtub and the downstairs shower. The drainpipe under the kitchen sink wasn't attached, and water flooded the floor until Jackson realized what was happening and put a bucket under it. Rainwater dripped down the interior walls and soaked his bed upstairs. Rain also ruined a portable stereo and television.

Jackson knew the house had problems, but he didn't understand the scope until his girlfriend, Sheila Johnson, saw the place. As she described it to him in unsparring detail, Jackson for the first time understood where he'd been living.

"He moved me in here under false pretenses," Jackson says of Alexander. "I didn't know what was wrong with the house because I couldn't see it."

On a sweltering Monday afternoon in mid-October, Jackson took a reporter and photographer through the home. A few days earlier, a city of Jacksonville code enforcement officer had condemned the 95-year-old structure as uninhabitable and given Jackson and his girlfriend a week to move. During the Oct. 9 inspection, code enforcement officials noted that the back of the house was separating from the front, and



that the roof leaked so badly that pieces of the ceiling were caving in. After Jackson moved out on Oct. 16, the city changed the status of the home to structurally unsafe, not just uninhabitable, and scheduled it for demolition.

At the time Folio Weekly visited Jackson, he and Johnson were occupying only the downstairs of the 1,600-square-foot home — the kitchen, a bathroom and two other rooms. They'd determined that the rest of the home was too exposed to the elements, or simply unsafe, but even the portion they lived in was in serious disrepair. A chunk of wall behind the sofa was missing, exposing a tangle of wires. An interior wall was bowed with moisture. A jalousie window in the kitchen had only a few panels of glass, and other windows were covered with ill-fitting pieces of plywood. In the room where the couple stored their clothes, a web of fabric-insulated wiring met at the center of the ceiling suspending a single, dangling bulb. Upstairs, it was worse. A slit of sky showed through a hole in the roof, and sodden floorboards sank when stepped on.

Jackson says he asked his landlord to fix the plumbing and complained about leaks in the roof when he first moved in. Alexander promised to make the repairs whenever he came to collect rent, Jackson says, but it never happened.

"Every time he's been here in the past eight months, it's been false promises, false

promises, false promises," says Jackson. "Mr. Earl is very cunning and slick. When I complained, he said, 'If you don't like it, move.'"

For his part, Alexander denies that he did anything wrong in renting Jackson the house. He admits it wasn't "the most beautiful rental," but notes that it had hot-and-cold running water, electricity, a toilet and a roof — far more than Jackson had living on the streets. He insists Jackson was only supposed to occupy the downstairs, and says he'd deliberately blocked off the upstairs until he could make repairs. For \$450 a month, Alexander says he thinks Jackson got a good deal.

"I don't feel like I took advantage of him," he said. "He begged me to let him have the place."

After his girlfriend moved in, Jackson's complaints intensified. Alexander responded, Jackson says, by announcing he would double the rent to \$900 a month since two people were now living in the home. Jackson says Alexander also threatened to shut the power off if Jackson didn't put the utilities into his own name. Such pronouncements aren't legal under Florida's Landlord-Tenant Law, which requires that a landlord give a month-to-month tenant notice in writing 15 days before changing the terms of a lease. But utilities were the least of Jackson's concerns. He couldn't afford a doubling of his

rent. And the home was still riddled with problems.

Desperate and afraid, Jackson decided to seek help. On Oct. 6, Jackson and Johnson walked the three miles from their house to Jacksonville Area Legal Aid on Bay Street, downtown. (They didn't have the money to use the JTA's disabled services van.) They encountered a rainstorm on the way, and by the time they arrived

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at attorney Alison Graham's office, they were soaked.

After listening to their story, Graham visited the East 12th Street home. A former criminal defense attorney with the Public Defender's Office, she's seen some dilapidated homes. Still, she couldn't believe the conditions. Just looking at the structure, she knew it was unsafe. Indeed, she says, a blind person is the only tenant Earl Alexander *could* have gotten to rent the house. Anyone with vision would've seen it was uninhabitable.

Because of this, Graham says, the situation is a clear instance of exploitation. She believes Alexander violated the federal and state Fair Housing Act by exploiting Jackson's disability. If necessary, Graham said on Oct. 12, she'd file suit to have all of Jackson's rent money, some \$3,600, returned.

"This situation encapsulates a problem we see coming up again and again with people that are in dire economic straits," Graham said. "There is a black market in rentals, and the disabled are particularly vulnerable."

Fair Housing Act violations can be reported as complaints to the Florida Commission on Human Relations or to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity. If discrimination is verified, an administrative law judge may assess civil fines and award damages. The Department of Justice may also decide to file a lawsuit on behalf of the federal government. An individual can



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also file suit in federal or state court and seek damages under the Fair Housing Act. Speaking in mid-October, Graham said she hadn't decided which course Jackson would follow.

"We will sit down together and explore our options and what route Marion wants to take and what would be the best for him in his specific circumstance," she said.

But that decision remained secondary to Jackson's primary one: He still had nowhere to live. Without money, transportation or the ability to read or use a computer, Graham noted, it's tough to access resources. Compounding the problem is the fact that Jackson is also a convicted felon. In 1998, while living in Savannah, Ga., Jackson stabbed a man he says tried to steal his disability money. Though he couldn't see the man, Jackson says, he pulled a pocketknife out of his sock and swung wildly at his attacker, hitting him in his chest. Jackson maintains he was the victim in the incident, but he spent four years in prison for attempted manslaughter nonetheless. That

conviction, which appears on any background check provided to a prospective landlord, has made the prospect of finding a good home even more elusive. Jackson's attempt at public housing was further stymied when he didn't have the money to process the application. (Legal Aid ultimately paid the \$5 fee for him and will help him acquire a copy of his birth certificate, which is also required.)

Today, Jackson has been tentatively approved for public housing, despite his felony, but he still has to wait for an available unit. (He was ineligible for a city program that offers financial help to people whose rental housing is condemned, because he only had a verbal lease, not a signed lease, which is required to qualify.)

On Oct. 15, the day before he had to be out of the house on East 12th Street, Jackson still didn't have a place to go. Asked what Legal Aid would do for him if he couldn't find housing, Graham paused. "There isn't a plan," she said.



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In contrast to the squalor of 1071 E. 12th Street, Earl Alexander lives in a sprawling brick ranch home on a leafy street in Mandarin. His son, Nathan Alexander, promised to have him call Folio Weekly. But when Earl Alexander hadn't called by the end of the day on Oct. 14, I drove to his home.

Dressed in a loose-fitting white shirt and shorts, and just out of the shower, the gray-haired 61-year-old talked briefly while standing at my car window. He asked that Folio Weekly not publish anything that would portray him in a negative light to his family and friends, and he said he'd already offered to return Jackson's rent.

"I'll give his money back to him and just let him go on his way," said Alexander.

While acknowledging that much of the house was in poor condition, Alexander denies that he tried to hike Jackson's rent or that he misrepresented the condition of the

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home to a blind man. He says he was only trying to give a hand up to a homeless person, and suggests Jackson stirred up trouble for him because he didn't want to take over the utility payments after his girlfriend moved in. In retrospect, Alexander says he made a mistake renting the house. "I made a bad call in allowing him in," he says. "I thought I was helping somebody out."

Epilogue

After he learned the house was condemned and that Legal Aid was involved, Alexander spoke to Graham. She says he agreed to refund Jackson's rent (she agreed not to disclose the exact amount) and to participate in a Fair Housing training program offered to landlords by Jacksonville Area Legal Aid.

"In good faith, he wanted to do the right thing," says Graham. "I'm very pleased that he was willing to make Marion whole without having to go through litigation, and I'm absolutely pleased that he's done the right thing at our very first contact."

Legal Aid will no longer represent Jackson after his money is refunded, says Graham, even if he doesn't have a place to live. Finding housing for clients isn't Legal Aid's role. Graham has referred Jackson to charitable organizations that provide emergency housing and other aid.

"Mr. Alexander's cooperation is going to make [Jackson] solvent in the immediate future," says Graham. "That has really changed his circumstances. It relieves some of the pressure, so he can look into other options." □