

Nightmare for Rent

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Chris Lofland and Hannah Brill stand in their Greenwood Village home, which underwent hundreds of thousands of dollars in repairs after being flooded by raw sewage. They say their tenants, who later pleaded guilty to criminal mischief, purposefully caused the damage. Photos by Peter Jones



Cindy Chez and Justin Greenbaum, who now live in a Glendale apartment, say their previous landlords spied on them before purposefully flooding the house and reporting their children to Social Services. They say they pleaded guilty as part of an unsuccessful effort to get their kids back.

Landlord-tenant horror story is one for the books ... and soap operas

By Peter Jones

There is not much that Hannah Brill and Justin Greenbaum agree on, but the onetime landlord and tenant are unified in the utter weirdness of their story.

"I couldn't make this up if I tried. This is bad," Brill said with the kind of ironic bemusement that only comes with 18 months of retrospection.

"It's like a Jerry Springer story," Greenbaum said, referencing the tabloid talk show host known for showcasing prurient guests and conflicts. "If I was hearing it, I wouldn't know what to think."

That is where the mutual agreement ends. Hearing former landlord Brill and her former tenant Greenbaum tell their stories is like watching a cheesier version of *Rashomon*, the acclaimed 1950 Japanese film by Akira Kurosawa that famously depicted very disparate, yet impassioned, firsthand accounts of the same incident.

To hear Brill tell it, she was the naïve victim of a con artist who purposefully trashed her multi-million dollar Greenwood Village home.

“It’s a nightmare. There was urine on the walls. There was raw sewage. All of the furniture had to be replaced. The kids never used the bathroom,” said Brill, a mortgage broker whose clients have included former Denver Broncos.

But according Greenbaum, a self-described bail-enforcement agent, he was Brill’s dupe, an innocent father taken in by a manipulative landholder who was inexplicably bent on invading his privacy and destroying his family.

“She was mad that I called police when I found hidden cameras in the house. We were taken advantage of,” he said. “We ended up losing our children. Our whole life ended up getting ripped apart. This lady needs to be stopped.”

However you read the story – several police visits and numerous court dates later – the Brill-Greenbaum saga is at least in part a cautionary tale about the importance of due diligence and trusting one’s gut, especially among landlords and tenants.

But this is also a drama about the ambiguity of truth and how third-party observers to a story must also put faith in their own proverbial guts.



Justin Greenbaum displays his bail-enforcement badge in his Glendale apartment. The badge helped gain the trust of his previous landlord.

A landlord's nightmare

After having inadvertently rented another home to a disastrous marijuana-grow operation, Brill and her boyfriend, Chris Lofland, were twice shy about leasing their Greenwood Village house to anyone, but a series of circumstances required it.

In November 2012 when the Greenbaums – Justin, his fiancé Cindy Chez and two children – showed up at the door, Brill heaved a huge sigh of relief. It did not hurt that Brill felt a kinship with Greenbaum when she learned that he, like Brill, was Jewish and hailed originally from New York City. What's more, Greenbaum was wearing a reassuring dark blue security uniform, a gun and a badge.

"They seemed like a really nice family. We had good interaction," Brill said. "Finally, I felt really comfortable. I'm a hard person to convince, but I saw that badge."

Brill even let the Greenbaums move in early without first signing a lease or receiving a deposit or credit report, a decision she would soon regret.

"There were a bunch of red flags, but we were in a situation where we were devastated by the other house. He always had an answer and he was fast," Brill said. "I don't even know who the references were I talked to. We never knew they were in a hotel they had wrecked, and the credit report I kept asking for never came."

According to Brill, she knew she had been had when Chez, a professional stripper, showed up to her office with another man – his arm around her – who paid the deposit and acted as if he would be the one moving into the house with Chez.

"For the first time in my life, I didn't have anything to say," Brill said.

After making a quick call to her attorney, Brill says she was told it would be difficult under Colorado law to get the Greenbaums out. Although no lease had been signed, the family had legal possession of the home.

The realization came before a rent check for \$5,000 bounced from an account that had less than \$5, Brill said. She says the house was soon devastated by ants that Brill thinks were attracted to an accumulation of urine and feces – waste that was not necessarily coming from the family's disallowed cats.

"It turned out to be human urine and feces on the carpet," Brill said. "When I complained, the tenants removed the toilets and stuffed them with jalapenos, cat litter, paper towels and landscaping material. There was raw sewage to our ankles."

Before long, Brill's attorney began eviction proceedings and the police were investigating. The Greenbaums made counterclaims that Brill had been spying on them with hidden cameras – perhaps to watch the couple have sex.

Although Brill says she had indeed used a camera system to monitor her nonverbal autistic son, she insists all cameras were removed when she left the house, leaving only a

disconnected recorder installed. The cameras, provided by Greenbaum and confiscated by police, must have been installed by the tenants, themselves, the landlord says

“I’d rather watch paint dry,” Brill said.

After the Greenbaums left voluntarily in early February 2013, Arapahoe County Human Services took their children on a referral by Greenwood Village police. As for the house damage, Greenbaum and Chez made courtroom plea bargains that resulted in three-year probation sentences for criminal mischief. The couple says they now must submit to regular drug testing and make payments to an insurance fund, among other requirements.

Brill says she was left with hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage and her family was only able to move back into her home in recent months.

“This changed us forever,” she said.



The basement swimming pool – since repaired – was for a time filled with raw sewage.

A tenant's rebuttal

Although Greenbaum concurs with much of Brill's chronology, his interpretation and attribution of blame could not be more in contrast. He stands by his claim that Brill and her boyfriend, Lofland, were spying on his family in an effort to defame their character, in part due to Chez's

occupation.

As Chez prepared matzo ball soup for her fiancée in their modest Glendale apartment, the couple recounted their own version of events.

“I found cameras in the house,” Greenbaum said. “They said I was a drug dealer and my fiancée was a prostitute. Why? Because we’re from Miami? Because maybe our lifestyle is different? Because we work nights?”

Greenbaum and Chez say they were railroaded and are still in the continuing process of appealing the adoption of their two children.

“They never did an investigation into child abuse,” Greenbaum insisted. “This whole thing was a setup from the beginning. My son had a habit of pulling off his diaper and running around the house. One day, he ended up pooping on the floor. It happened one time and I haven’t seen my son in two years.”

As for the cesspool of garbage and sewage that somehow flooded and destroyed much of the basement, Greenbaum maintains that Lofland was responsible, perhaps as part of a bizarre insurance-related scheme, he surmises.

“The very next day after he came to service the pool, all of a sudden there’s a flood in the basement,” Greenbaum said. “That’s when they tried to say we were letting the children live in deplorable conditions. I think Hannah was so mad that I called police because I found the hidden cameras.”

Chez says she knew the couple had been spied on when Brill confronted her about their lease-violating pets.

“She said something about ‘We’re watching and we saw your cats,’ and we’re like, ‘Wait a minute, you’re watching?’ Chez said.

She says the landlord-tenant relationship was further strained when Brill opted to keep an office in the large house for her own use.

“It was right next to the bedrooms. We have a family. Nobody would agree to this. That’s when everything changed,” Chez said.

As for the children allegedly living in squalor, the mother is adamant.

“My kids were always bathed. They loved baths,” she said.

Greenbaum and Chez differ on their recollections of the bounced check written on the account of Greenbaum’s mother. While Greenbaum says he stopped the check, Chez says Brill took the check as a sort of placeholder and agreed not to cash it on the condition that a future payment be made.

Whatever the case, no charges were filed against Brill in relation to seized cameras. In comparison, Greenbaum and Chez eventually made a plea deal that resulted in a deferred judgment. In such a case, if the defendant completes his or her probation successfully, all charges would be dismissed and a felony conviction avoided.

“We could have taken it to trial, but we were told if we pled guilty we’d get our kids back. The pleas were made more under duress than anything,” Greenbaum said.

What’s more, the bail enforcer is now prohibited from carrying a gun.

“It makes my job a lot more dangerous, but this is what I do,” he said.

A lease on reality

As strange as the Brill-Greenbaum case may seem, it was not necessarily all that unusual, according to Greenwood Village Police Chief John Jackson.

“The facts are the same. The people’s names are different,” he said of the case. “There are always at least three sides to every story. It makes for a very difficult case to investigate.”

Such situations can also be a difficult to navigate from a legal perspective. That is why the Colorado Legislature carved out particular rights for tenants, says Jacob Eppler, an attorney specializing in landlord-tenant law who has represented both sides in a wide range of cases.

Eppler says in many incidents a landlord can be charged with trespassing – criminally and civilly – for entering a rented property without permission.

“Shelter is one of those things that’s a very basic human need,” he said. “As you can imagine, there’s a differential in sophistication and power between the landlord and tenant.”

Even so, Eppler does not buy the conventional wisdom that possession is nine tenths of the law, even in a situation such as Brill’s. He points to a specific and detailed process in state law that he says can remove problem tenants from properties in a matter of 30 days.

“Generally, tenants do not have a valid defense. It’s very rare,” he said. “The only way a tenant can thwart that is if they file bankruptcy.”

According to Eppler, even without benefit of a signed lease, a landlord can evict a tenant in such situations because the “lease” effectively becomes month to month, which means it can be ended legally by either party with only seven days notice.

Whatever the legal implications, the Brill-Greenbaum debacle is not one that anyone involved in it will soon forget.

Linda Greenbaum, Justin’s mother who lived with the couple during part of the fiasco, thinks the story may even be interesting enough for Hollywood.

“I have a friend who’s a writer who does a lot of stuff for Lifetime TV. She said when this is done she wants to do a story on it,” the grandmother said. “This really needs to be brought out

to the public.”

For Brill’s part, she is still in disbelief about the true-life soap opera.

“It’s laughable,” she said of Greenbaum’s version of events. “But what’s funny is I bought it. They nailed me, but it was my fault.”