

The Works

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Oh, Mercy

Nuns kick AIDS patients to the curb so a developer can build town houses.

By Ben Joravsky

AIDSCare, a residential facility for people with AIDS, is in a mansion in a high-end Lakeview neighborhood, but its founder and CEO, Jim Flosi, never worried about gentrification driving him out. He figured that if anyone was immune to the pitches of real estate brokers and developers it was the sisters of the Society of Helpers of the Holy Souls, the nuns who owned the mansion and had invited him to set up his nonprofit there. "With our landlords I thought we'd be here for a long time to come," he says.

Boy, was he wrong. In May the nuns gave Flosi and his 18 AIDS residents official notice that they had 90 days to get out—the sisters were selling their property for a reported \$21 million so it could be turned into upscale town houses. "I don't have housing for all of my residents," says Flosi. "Most of our residents are unable to live on their own. Many have a triple diagnosis—AIDS, mental disorder, and addiction."

The Meeker Mansion, built in 1913 by a packinghouse magnate, sits on two acres between Barry and Wellington on inner Lake Shore Drive, just west of Lincoln Park. The nuns bought the property in 1945, converted the mansion's coach house into a residence, and built a chapel and a dormitory. During the 60s and 70s they lived in both the dormi-

tory and the mansion. But their numbers began dwindling, and in 1993 the sisters invited AIDSCare to move into the mansion and coach house. "We needed housing," says Flosi, "and they had room."

Flosi, a former priest, converted the mansion into a residence for people with AIDS and set up his group's offices in the coach house. The nuns remained in the dormitory, and both groups shared the chapel. "The sisters didn't charge us any rent," says Flosi. "They only asked that we pay the utilities—gas, electricity, water. Last year that totaled about \$90,000."

He says he appreciates what the sisters did for his group, particularly since there are only two other 24-hour-care facilities for people with AIDS in the city. "I have to say that the nuns have been extremely good up until now," he says. "In essence, they have given us a gift of about \$150,000 a year, which is the amount we would probably have to spend on rent. Without them this agency wouldn't be in existence today."

Flosi knows he's partly to blame for his current situation. "We had a ten-year lease with two five-year options," he says. "Our first option had to be exercised by March 2002. We didn't exercise that option—it was an oversight. But then we never thought a sale was imminent."



AIDSCare head Jim Flosi; the Meeker Mansion, 315 W. Barry; resident Ernest Cole packing up

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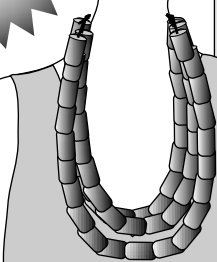
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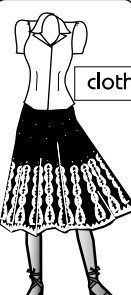
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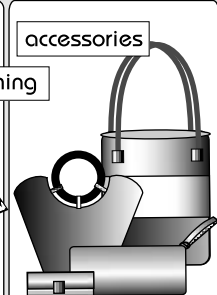
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Last November Sister Mary Ellen Moore, the order's treasurer, told Flosi the nuns were thinking of selling the property. "I could understand why they were selling—there were less than ten nuns still here," he says. "Sister Mary Ellen said she'd keep us informed."

A few months later Flosi saw Millie Rosenbloom, a real estate broker, showing two men around his office. "I introduced myself, and Millie said she was the real estate broker," he says. "I thought, 'A real estate broker? Uh-oh. What's going on?'"

In early April he found out. "Sister Mary Ellen invited me and the former chairman of my board for a meeting," he says. "Millie did most of the talking. She told us that the sisters were exercising their option to have us vacate the property by August—the sisters were selling their property." But he still hoped he'd be able to work something out.

Then several developers came to look. This was prime property—one of the largest pieces of mostly undeveloped land left along the north lakefront. According to Flosi, the sisters were offered about \$20 million

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by a developer who was willing to allow AIDSCare to stay. But the sisters accepted an offer from a different developer, LR Development Company, which apparently wants AIDSCare to move. (LR's president, Thomas Weeks, didn't return my calls.) According to the *Sun-Times*, Weeks paid "about \$21 million" and "wants to build a complex of low-rise single-family homes."

There's still a minuscule chance that AIDSCare will be allowed to stay. The alderman, the 44th Ward's Tom Tunney, the city's first openly gay alderman, has long championed AIDS-related causes—his name's on a plaque listing big funders that hangs outside AIDSCare's office. As alderman, he has significant control over what gets built on the site because the land is covered by the lakefront protection

ordinance, meaning any development needs city approval. He could play hardball and tell LR he'll object to their building plans unless they let AIDSCare stay.

Apparently Tunney doesn't want to play hardball. He says his first concern is to help the AIDSCare residents find new housing. "I have always been a strong supporter of AIDSCare," he says, "and I will work very hard to find them housing."

I called Sister Mary Ellen Moore and Rosenbloom, but they didn't call me back. Instead I got a phone call from Peter Olesker, a publicist who says he represents Rosenbloom and the nuns. He said Rosenbloom had no comment, and he e-mailed me a statement on the sisters' behalf. "Today, the need to provide ongoing care for our elderly

and infirm members is prompting us to sell the property," it reads. "While we regret having to leave the Lakeview neighborhood after almost 60 years, we are pleased with the work we have done here, including the assistance we have provided to AIDSCare for the past 12 years."

"On May 2," Flosi says, "we met with Sister Mary Ellen and Millie, and they told us we had to move out by July 31. I said, 'It will take a miracle to get all of our residents out in 90 days and in appropriate housing.' Millie turned to Sister Mary Ellen and said, 'Sister, we know miracles happen every day.' I found that remark very condescending and insensitive, especially since we're dealing with very sick people."

Flosi and his staff have been scrambling to find new homes for their residents. "We were able to move some to our west-side facility, but we don't have enough room there for everyone," he says. "This is not just a matter of finding them apartments. Some of them need assisted living. They should not be living on their own."

The eviction has also caused a financial problem for AIDSCare,

which gets about \$300,000 a year from the city. "We get grants specifically earmarked to fund supportive living with 24-hour care," says Flosi. "If we don't have that housing—and we won't after we move out of here—we lose the money. Then I don't know what we'll do."

On June 6 Flosi sent a letter to Sister Mary Ellen, spelling out his group's predicament and pleading for more time. "I am in a bind as you can tell and am searching for ways to fulfill the vacancy order on time," he wrote. "If you have any suggestions, please advise me at your earliest convenience."

On June 24 Sister Mary Ellen, Rosenbloom, and the nuns' lawyer met with Flosi. "Sister Mary Ellen didn't say much," says Flosi. But the lawyer reminded him that AIDSCare had to pay the last installment on the utilities, around \$46,000.

Flosi says he's paid that bill and will keep trying to meet the deadline. "I hope to God we house all of our residents," he says. "If not, we're staying here. They can call the sheriff. But we're not about to throw people out into the street." ■

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