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From a crumbling slum come the resources to build a new life

After 13 years, the Cuevas family will no longer live with bedbugs, moldy walls and cramped quarters. A legal settlement gave them the means to move up and forced their landlord to improve conditions.

By Jessica Garrison

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Sitting in the dank, dark, one-room apartment she shares with five other family members, Alejandra Cuevas ignored a cockroach creeping across the wall next to her and threw her head back and laughed.

The bugs don't trouble her anymore because in the next few weeks, Cuevas said, she is planning to buy a duplex in Bakersfield -- with cash. She'll plant flowers in the yard and keep "birds and beautiful things."

A windfall has come to Cuevas and more than a dozen other immigrant families who have been living in squalor at 621 S. Union Ave., a crumbling, once-beautiful Art Deco building near downtown Los Angeles. A Los Angeles judge approved a settlement this fall that netted each resident more than \$40,000 in damages -- amounting to more than \$250,000 for some families. It was payment for having had to endure their building's slum conditions, which, according to court papers and lawyers, included bedbugs, backed-up sewage and poisonous levels of lead paint.

Adam Murray, director of the Inner City Law Center that won the \$3.3-million settlement, said the case is part of a new strategy that he hopes will moti-

vate bad landlords across the city to clean up their acts. The group is litigating six such cases; in years past they might have pursued just one.

"We are trying to change slumlords' behavior," he said.

It remains to be seen whether the strategy will accomplish that. The landlord in this case, Monica Hujazi, settled another habitability case in 2006 in which she and others agreed to pay 220 tenants nearly \$7 million. She also has been convicted of dozens of criminal counts of housing and fire code violations over the years, but prosecutors and advocates say she has done little to improve conditions in her buildings.

Hujazi declined to comment. Her attorney said he had represented her for only a short time and was unable to comment on the case. Other landlords have said they are being unfairly targeted by the city and advocacy groups, blamed for conditions that are actually caused by tenants.

At one point Hujazi filed a countersuit against some of her tenants, accusing them of running businesses out of their apartments in violation of building rules. The suit was dismissed as a condition of the settlement.

There is also the question of how such settlements, if they become more prevalent, will shape the fates of the poor who receive them. Many tenants say the money is life-changing. But history suggests the path out of poverty is not always so simple.

Nancy Mintie, an attorney who founded the Inner City Law Center, praised efforts to win such settlements but cautioned that she had seen some

people secure large awards only to wind up back in slum housing years later.

"They lived off the money until it had run out," Mintie said, "but because no one in the family had education, they had fallen back down."

Such concerns are far from the minds of many at 621 S. Union Ave., where tenants smiled and laughed when asked about the case.

Antonio Dominguez is taking his whole family to Mexico for the first time in years -- his children will meet their grandmother. Family members have talked of opening a business when they return.

Down the hall, Guillermo Siniscalchi says he hopes to give his newborn daughter better opportunities.

Some tenants might stay in the century-old building despite the award. As part of the settlement, a judge appointed a receiver to oversee repairs. They are proceeding slowly, but things are getting better, many tenants said.

"It's like winning the lottery," said Cuevas, laughing. She sat at a small table in the room where she and her family have lived for the last 13 years. To her left was a tiny kitchen, to her right a bathroom with a crumbling ceiling and visible mold. Next to the front door was a small closet where her older son and his wife sleep.

Cuevas, her husband, her daughter and her other son all sleep in the main room. It also accommodates all their possessions, which include a cabinet full of porcelain figurines of horses and puppies.

Asked about her years in the building, Cuevas, an immigrant from Mex-



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though she might cry. She recalled the time dirty water spewed from the pipes and the landlord balked at replacing her carpet until a city inspector ordered otherwise. The day the ceiling fell in. And, worst of all, the bedbugs. "My kids would say, 'Mommy, we can't sleep. Mommy, the bedbugs,' " she said.

Cuevas would have liked to move but could not afford to. When she moved in, the building was rundown but clean. Conditions did not become deplorable, her attorney said, until Hujazi bought it.

Lawyers and tenant organizers for Inner City began talking to tenants in the spring of 2007. They were horrified by what they heard: the mother whose newborn was suffering from lead poisoning; the father who woke up in the night and heard his son talking to the bedbugs. "You can bite me," the boy said. "But please don't bite my sister."

Still, organizing the tenants was difficult, said Julius Thompson, Inner City's lead attorney on the case.

Many refused, saying they were frightened because they were illegal immigrants or because they could get evicted and never find another place so cheap. Others were deemed unsuitable as litigants because they seemed to be drinking nearly every time lawyers came in contact with them.

In the end, Inner City signed up 57 people in 18 units as plaintiffs and filed the case in November 2007.

Nearly a dozen attorneys, including a handful from the firm Latham & Watkins working pro bono, were assigned to the case at various times. The two years of litigation illustrated one reason these cases remain relatively rare, despite the potentially big payoff and the large number of unsavory apartment buildings in Los Angeles.

Such cases are incredibly labor intensive, and at the end, many landlords simply don't pay anything, or offer up an asset that no lawyer wants. "Do you really want to end up owning a slumlord building?" asked one lawyer.

In this case, the settlement was paid mostly by insurance companies, according to lawyers for Inner City, which received a share of the funds.

Cuevas' 17-year-old daughter, Vanessa, said she is convinced the settlement will make a difference in her life. A senior in high school, she made a short film comparing the deplorable living conditions in her building with the nicer ones in a friend's residence -- and was delighted when it won an award.

She hopes to study film in college next year, maybe at San Francisco State or Humboldt State.

She plans to take with her another lesson as well: "If people are living in an unsafe place, they should do something about it."