

Leader of Mattapan tenant organization staves off eviction ... for now

By [Danny McDonald](#) and [Izzy Bryars](#) Globe Staff and Globe Correspondent, Updated October 30, 2024, 6:45 p.m.



Annie Gordon, right, didn't react to the jury's verdict until she left the courtroom. She is comforted by her best friend and neighbor Betty Lewis. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

A 73-year-old leader of a Mattapan tenant organization Wednesday celebrated what she considered to be a legal victory in what has become a [yearslong fight](#) with her landlord, who wants to kick her out of her home of nearly 50 years.

A nervous Annie Gordon had waited for a few hours with a couple of supporters while [an Eastern Housing Court](#) jury deliberated her eviction case. For her, much hung in the

balance. Would she be forced to leave her home of 48 years near Mattapan Square? Considering that possibility, she hadn't slept well in recent days. The unknown gnawed at her.

Eventually, good news arrived for Gordon: The jury found that she had not breached her rental contract with her landlord, Bismarck Street Owner LLC, which meant that she could continue to live in her home, at the development now known as SoMa Apartments at the T. However, the jury also found that the landlord did not retaliate against her, an assertion advocates had made against Bismarck, given Gordon's work on behalf of tenants.

"Relieved," said Gordon after she broke down in tears outside a courtroom in housing court in Boston's West End. "Very relieved."

An attorney representing the landlord declined to comment after the verdict. But in legal filings, lawyers for the landlord allege that Gordon demonstrated behavior that "defeats any ability to maintain (and goes against the fostering of) a healthy landlord-tenant relationship."

While Gordon counts the court's decision as a win, it doesn't necessarily mean her battle with her landlord is over. In fact, she expects the owners of the property, formerly known as Fairlawn Apartments, to bring her back to court. And she does not appear to be alone. Since Bismarck bought the property six years ago, Gordon and other tenants have fought evictions, according to advocates.

"I live in Fairlawn, everyone I know is getting evicted from there," said Pristine Smith, who was at court supporting Gordon.

Last fall, attorneys for her landlord sent her a 30-day notice that they intended to terminate her tenancy. They noted that her lease had expired in 2019 and she had been living on a month-to-month arrangement since, although her attorneys refute some of

those details, saying she signed no lease in 2019 and that the last time she signed a rental agreement was under prior ownership of the development.

“The reason for non-renewing and terminating your tenancy is due to your recent unwarranted conduct taken by you and an irreconcilable breakdown in the landlord-tenant relationship,” read one letter from the landlord’s attorneys.

Lawyers for the landlord said that management staffers have presented Gordon with reasonable options that would allow her to stay at her home.

“However, their efforts have met with nothing but outright and (unreasonable) rejection,” said the landlord’s attorneys. “Your communications with management staff have been abrupt, unwelcoming, and unnecessarily combative.”

Gordon, for her part, rejects any charge that she was hostile or rude to property management, saying “I did nothing wrong.” Her attorneys backed up her assertion, saying in court filings that Gordon’s notice-to-quit, which is the legal document that formally notifies the tenant that the tenancy will be terminated, was overly vague and failed to cite specific terms of any tenancy agreement that were allegedly violated.

“There is no description of the conduct — no alleged words exchanged, no alleged specific actions taken, and no dates nor time frame,” Gordon’s attorneys said through court filings.

According to court documents, Gordon spent years organizing her neighbors to assert their rights as tenants, including insisting that property management address deplorable conditions in her home and the homes of her neighbors. City Life/Vida Urbana, a local housing advocacy group, said that the company that bought the 347-unit development formerly known as Fairlawn Apartments did so to capitalize off a new Blue Hill commuter rail stop that Mattapan residents, including Gordon, pushed for, in order for the neighborhood to have an equitable commute into the core of the city.

According to City Life, the new owner tried to raise rents and push longtime tenants out. Some left but others resisted moving out. City Life alleged that Gordon's eviction "seems like clear retaliation for Annie's work with her tenant association to fight displacement from their homes," although a jury rejected that charge on Wednesday.

Advocates at City Life also say that Bismarck representatives created a "nasty culture" at their property in Mattapan.

"In order for people to find some peace, [Bismarck] can't be there," said Gabrielle Rene, a City Life community organizer who has been at most court dates with Gordon.

Gordon said she likes living in Boston, saying her location is convenient for her needs and there is also the sentimentality of living in the place where she raised her son, she said.

After hugging her attorneys, Gordon acknowledged that her story is a part of the region's rampaging housing crisis. Oftentimes, it is here, at the Edward W. Brooke Courthouse where that crisis, which affects some of the region's most vulnerable residents, grinds on. Here, at the housing court, is where the numbers that define that crisis — inflation, rising rents and property values, the scarcity of affordable housing units — become a painful reality.

To buy a single-family home in Boston, [you need a household income of \\$217,000](#), according to the [Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University](#).

The city, she said, is "just not affordable for most people like me."

Gordon favors some form of rent control, she said.

"If the rents were better, I think people could survive better," she said.

She said she retired from working at AT&T some years ago, but has had to pick up a part-time job at Wal-Mart in the suburbs to keep up with the rising cost of living. Her current

landlord came in and tried to raise rents, she said. Historically, people who have lived at the apartments have not made a lot of money, she said.

“I had to keep up with expenses because the rent’s so high,” she said.

Danny McDonald can be reached at daniel.mcdonald@globe.com. Follow him [@Danny__McDonald](https://twitter.com/Danny_McDonald). Izzy Bryars can be reached at izzy.bryars@globe.com. Follow her [@izzybryars](https://twitter.com/izzybryars).



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