

EAST PALO ALTO

## Residents get rid of crack house

*Court awards neighbors of troubled house with \$22,500 in damages*

Five East Palo Alto residents, frustrated for years by drug-dealing and drug use in a house down the street, have won a victory in their efforts to get rid of the troublesome tenants.

The residents sued the house's landlord because he was allowing his tenants to operate a crack house. The residents won \$22,500 in small claims court June 4. That decision was appealed, and they won again Aug. 28.

The troubling tenants are now gone.

The neighbors of the house on Palo Verde Avenue near Weeks Street tried writing letters to the property owner, Ram Chander of San Mateo. "He never responded to us at all," said one of the neighbors, Ken Hahn.

But as soon as the five residents filed their lawsuit in small claims court last December, Hahn said that the drug-dealing family was immediately evicted by the landlord, and a for-sale sign went up on the property. The house has since been sold.

The small claims court victory over a crack house is believed to be the first of its kind in San Mateo County, said Estela Guerrero, one of the five people who filed suit.

Guerrero and her husband have four children and she said she wouldn't let her kids play in the front yard without her when the drug house was doing business a few doors away.

"When I first started this, I was scared to death when I found out what kind of family it was," Guerrero said. "It's just been hell all this time." She said that drug customers would come to the house at all hours of the day and night, often interfering with her family's ability to sleep.

The five residents filed papers in court which itemized all their expenses because of the crack house. Those expenses included items lost during burglaries, the price of a gun for protection, the price of a video camera to record comings and go-

ings at the house, the price of new locks for their doors, and even \$500 for the purchase of a Rotweiler, \$800 to train the dog, and \$40 a month in dog food.

The five also each argued for compensation for their pain and suffering.

They itemized claims for much more than they eventually won, but they did win \$22,500 collectively in court and may have set a precedent for other residents—and other landlords—to take note of.

Hahn noted that his home was burglarized three times during the years 1992-96, when the crack house was in business. All of his cars were broken into. His 1983 Toyota station wagon was stolen and recovered three times.

The five plaintiffs were helped by Dennis Scherzer of the anti-drug group Turnaround East Palo, who went to court with them. Guerrero also noted that an East Palo Alto police sergeant went to court with them and testified that the family running the crack house was notorious, that its members had significant criminal records and that arrests had been made at the house.

But the five residents mostly did the work themselves to regain peace and quiet on their street and reduce burglaries and street crime.

"We don't want to take people to court because we're not police offi-

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—Estela Guerrero, neighbor

cers," Guerrero said, "but it's like we're doing their work for them."

All five said they were frustrated by the lack of police action against the family in the crack house. "The only resort we had was to go to a civil suit," said Doug Harrington, one of the five.

"If we had more assistance from the District Attorney's Office or the Police Department, we wouldn't have to do this," Guerrero said. "It wasn't our intent to make any money off this."

"Our intent was to force the landlord to evict those criminal tenants," Hahn said.

They won. "There are still a lot of drug houses around here," Guerrero noted. ■

—Don Kazak