

Averting Eviction

Gelt Foundation wants to keep responsible tenants facing a financial emergency in their apartments, thus preventing homelessness.

By HELEN FLOERSH Staff Reporter

Many Angelenos living paycheck to paycheck are one financial crisis away from eviction – and quite possibly an extended nightmare of homelessness. Visual reminders of what’s at stake range from tent cities on Skid Row to RV camps in Van Nuys industrial parks.

That’s why **Keith Wasserman** and **Damian Langere**, founders of Tarzana apartment company **Gelt Inc.**, have formed a foundation to prevent families from becoming displaced in the first place.

“We’re very charitable as a company and personally, and we wanted to give back in the area that has brought us so much,” Wasserman said. “What better way than to help the renters under our roofs?”

Gelt Foundation is a nonprofit organization that provides tenants facing eviction with the funding they need to keep their homes. Three renters so far have received assistance since the foundation’s soft launch late this summer, and its Executive Director **Tina Oswald** is working to spread the word about its programs to property managers nationwide.

“As a society, we don’t think about helping the responsible people until it’s too late,” she explained. “The model for dealing with homelessness is that you have to be on the street already – you can’t still be in a home.”

New thinking

Oswald came to the Gelt Foundation from the **mikeroWOrKS Foundation**, the nonprofit of **Mike Rowe**, host of the television show “Dirty Jobs,” where she oversaw operations for seven years as the organization’s vice president. One of the nonprofit’s objectives was to encourage youth who were disillusioned by the idea of going to college to take on jobs in skilled trades instead – a somewhat unorthodox notion for many in higher education.

“In 2009, the doctrine was that everyone needed to go to college ... and Mike said, ‘Let’s stop and rethink this,’” Oswald recalled. “That kind of creative thinking prepared me for Gelt, which also has a unique perspective.”

Gelt Foundation’s program has two main components: The provision of grants or no-interest loans for the otherwise responsible renters who fall behind due to an unexpected financial challenge, and longer-term financial literacy education for those who receive assistance. A struggling tenant who is facing a monetary crisis is identified and referred to the foundation through a property manager. If the tenant meets the foundation’s criteria, which include proof of income and a willingness to enroll in budgeting or other financial counseling courses, she or he receives the necessary funds to avoid eviction.

“It’s sometimes hard for people to ask for help, which is why we work with the property managers,” Oswald said. “If you’re a hard-



PHOTOS BY DAVID SPRAGUE

Triumvirate: Gelt Foundation Executive Director Tina Oswald and founders Damian Langere and Keith Wasserman in Tarzana.

only employee.

“Every dollar we raise is a dollar to help people,” Oswald said. For now, she is not engaging in active fundraising efforts, instead focusing on reaching out to property managers. She has established relationships with Dallas-based **Pinnacle Property Management** and **FPI Management** in Costa Mesa, which together manage nearly 300,000 units across the U.S. More are in the works.

“The first time I had conference calls with property managers, there was always this quizical response,” Oswald said. “But now that I have the stories, people get it.”

Cash-strapped

The foundation’s reach is not limited to California. Two of the three tenants who have received funds since the foundation’s soft launch were laid off from their jobs due to Hurricane Harvey and spent their savings on food for their families. The third, a single mother from Bakersfield, had to pay for her brother’s funeral after he died unexpectedly.

“These aren’t people who spent too much money on vacations,” Oswald said. “We’re a bridge. I just want to make sure that once we



Brainstorm: Foundation meeting in the offices of apartment investment firm Gelt Inc.

individuals to keep rent expenses below 30 percent of their monthly income, most Angelenos pay nearly twice as much, a report published earlier this year by apartment listing aggregator **ApartmentList.com** said.

The otherwise responsible tenants who find themselves on the cusp of eviction are a strongly under-researched demographic, Oswald said. Once property managers learn of how the program works, they are often reminded of the good tenants who they had to let go due to their inability to pay.

“I spoke to one woman who said, ‘I’ve been a property manager for 22 years – I wish I’d had this a long time ago,’” Oswald said. “It’s just a matter of getting our message out there.”

Property manager PR

Gelt Foundation also aspires to change the profile of property managers, who they feel are often depicted as prioritizing profits over people. Many people are unaware of how little

flexibility property managers have in keeping tenants in their apartments once they have fallen behind on rent.

“When (property managers) have to go down that eviction path, there’s really not much that can be done,” said Gelt Inc. co-founder Langere. “They can pile on late fees, but that leaves the tenant even further behind.”

The foundation’s programs take some of the burden off the owner-operator, he explained. Other programs that provide this kind of assistance have not existed until now.

“It’s just a broken system, we feel,” Wasserman said. “You have to be on your last straw to get some help.”

Ultimately, the foundation’s leaders would like to see programs offered by their organization replicated throughout the country.

“We want to set a precedent where all owners have an option for residents to receive financial assistance,” Wasserman said. “That would be a grand vision on our end.”

‘We want to set a precedent where all owners have an option for residents to receive financial assistance.’

KEITH WASSERMAN, Gelt Inc.

working person who’s contributing to society and something unexpected happens, that’s where we come in.”

The foundation has raised \$45,000 so far, including a \$10,000 donation from **Mitch Surowitz**, area vice president of insurance brokerage **Arthur J. Gallagher & Co.**’s Glendale office. Wasserman and Langere, who is also the founder of rent payment app **Domuso Inc.**, cover operational expenses out of their own pockets. Oswald is currently the foundation’s

build that bridge, they can keep on that path.”

The Gelt Foundation launch comes at a good time. Nearly 80 percent of Americans live one paycheck to the next, according to a 2017 report by **Harris Insights & Analytics**, a market research group, on behalf of job search engine **CareerBuilder**. In Los Angeles County, apartment rents are expected to rise 8 percent this year to an average of \$1,416 a month, according to a forecast published earlier this year by **USC**. While financial experts advise