

Dr. Janine Nkosi and Jose Lopez: Unhealthy housing demands attention

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Plywood can't speak, but it sends powerful messages to the community.

Boarded up houses and run-down properties make a clear statement: this neighborhood — which is almost always in south Fresno — and all the people who live there aren't worth the investment.

As a lecturer of sociology at Fresno State, I, Janine, take pride in advocating for equity and social justice through education. I want my students to think critically about social problems, gain an understanding of issues, and then work with the community to solve them. This is why we became involved in the “blight to light” campaign led by Faith in Community and supported by Fresno Building Healthy Communities, Tenants Together, and many others.

Phase one of our campaign came to a successful milestone a few weeks ago when the Fresno City Council approved an ordinance that demands landlords stop using plywood to “secure” their apartments and houses, establishes a registry to hold landlords accountable for their properties, and calls for the city to hire more code enforcement officers to enforce the law.

We are encouraged by our accomplishments, but we must do more because far more Fresnans are living in substandard housing conditions. One of the main reasons my students and I dedicated ourselves to this campaign is because we made a special connection with Jose Lopez. For Jose, the battle against blight is personal. Jose taught me valuable lessons about courage and civic engagement, and he was able to teach my students real-world lessons that I never could within the confines of the classroom.

Now it's time for our city leaders to move beyond the look of blight and listen to the thousands of residents who live in unhealthy and unsafe living conditions, like Jose and his family:

Your home should be a special place. You should feel safe at home. Your home is where you should be able to laugh the loudest, love the most, and enjoy a healthy life. Now imagine that your home is the exact opposite of this ideal. For years, I didn't have to imagine. It was very real. My situation has improved a bit in the past few weeks, thanks to all of the groups who raised the issue of blight, but for years, the apartment I shared with my family in central Fresno was not a healthy place.

Young people avoid home for a lot of different reasons — chores, rules, etc. — but I didn't want to go home because it wasn't healthy. I would do anything to stay away from our apartment. I would exercise for hours on end — way past exhaustion. I would stay at a public place until it closed. I would go anywhere but home. Our apartment had mold caused by water damage. The tiles in the kitchen and bathroom were coming apart. I didn't have a working light in my room.

I was letting go of hope. I was embarrassed by my situation. And I was angry. I wondered, where is the law? I go to school; I have a job; I take care of myself; I follow the rules, now how do the rules work for me?

It was then that I decided to get involved, educate myself and work for healthy housing in Fresno, the city that I love.

I became informed about the issue and the rights that I have as a tenant. Then, with the help of Tenants Together, I contacted Code Enforcement. That experience wasn't pleasant and what followed was discouraging. The city did not get back to me in the time they said they would. I had to reach out to numerous groups and a councilmember to get a

response. The process is still under way, but repairs have been made.

I feel I'm being heard for the first time, but we can't stop now. The city finally responded to my requests and sent a code enforcement officer to my apartment — the officer documented two full pages of problems. This issue is not unique to me. I canvassed a number of homes, and I met a lot of folks living in unsanitary conditions. Their dignity is being compromised by the greed of unscrupulous landlords.

I will continue to speak up because it shouldn't be this difficult to ensure all Fresnans have healthy homes. I will work with the city. Are they ready to work with residents?

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