

# The Columbus Dispatch

## ARTISTS FEAR LOSS OF HOMES, STUDIOS

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**Illustration:** Photo

**By Doug Caruso**  
*Dispatch City Hall Reporter*

Ike Okafor-Newsum worries more about being evicted than he does about a fire racing through the century-old former school where he and dozens of other artists live and work.

After all, the fire is a dim possibility, and Columbus officials are ready to go to court -- possibly this morning -- to evict him and other tenants from the *Milo* Arts Center at 617 E. 3rd Ave.

"I have a smoke detector, so I'm not worried about my safety," he said yesterday from the studio in the school's former third-grade reading room where he carves wood sculptures, paints and sometimes spends the night. "I can't lose my studio; it would be like losing my wife, man."

On Friday, Columbus building and fire officials gave the residents of the *Milo* building three days to pack up and leave. City officials cited the landlords, Rick and Donna Mann, for missing sprinklers and smoke detectors, a broken fire alarm and a broken standpipe.

"Their first discussion needs to be with their landlord," said Mark Barbash, Columbus director of trade and development. "In Columbus, the first obligation of a landlord is to maintain safe buildings."

The Manns' attorney, Bill Loveland, said the building passed fire inspections the past three years.

"Nothing's changed," he said. "Something is suspicious here."

He agreed that the Manns need to do some work on the building but said that giving tenants 72 hours to leave is "extreme."

Though the Manns have rented living and studio space to artists for 11 years, Kathy Kerr, deputy director for building and development services, said the city was unaware people were living in the building until an inspection Friday.

The last building inspection, she said, was in 1995, when inspectors told the Manns to fix fire-code problems before allowing people to live there.

By that time, Michael Herring, founder of the Red Herring Theatre Company, had been living there for three years.

"The entire time I was there, there was never any incident where I thought there was any problem," Herring said. "We used to produce our shows there. I always thought our audience was safe. It was indispensable to the development of Red Herring Theatre Company. We probably would not be here

today if we had not had the experience of working out of *Milo*."

Herring moved the theater company to the Short North on Sept. 1. He said he moved because he got a good deal on the new space, not because of any problems at *Milo*.

City-code enforcement agents, who inspect the outside of the building, cited the Manns several times between 1995 and this year for poor maintenance on the exterior, junk cars and an unapproved outdoor stage, city records show. The records also show Rick Mann was found guilty of criminal code violations in 1998, fined \$500 and sentenced to 60 days in jail.

Kerr said she now expects an assistant city attorney to go before Environmental Judge Richard C. Pfeiffer Jr. this morning to get a court order to remove the residents.

"Our goal is that the building is vacated and that the residents are safe," she said.

Kerr's department received a call about the *Milo* Arts Center on Sept. 13 from Chris Snyder, aide to City Council President Matt Habash. Snyder had been on a bus tour the day before with Mayor Michael B. Coleman, Barbash and members of the *Milo* Grogan Area Commission.

Coleman was preparing to announce that his "Neighborhood Pride" initiative would come to *Milo* Grogan in November, with code-enforcement sweeps, cleanup programs and other help. When the tour bus pulled in front of *Milo* Arts, the area commissioners complained that the building is an eyesore.

"It just stuck out and needed to be addressed like everything else," said John Mills, president of the area commission.

Snyder said she did what she always does when a constituent complains about a neighborhood problem. The day after the bus trip, she phoned Kerr's office.

Asked how the property could have gone for years without the city noticing the fire hazards, Barbash acknowledged that it shows that code enforcement is complaint-driven.

"What it does point out is that code enforcement has to be proactive and systematic in protecting the neighborhoods," he said.

The city is being too inflexible, said James Morton, a painter who pays \$185 a month, utilities included, for a 10-by-20-foot studio and apartment at *Milo* Arts.

"What they need to do is help (Mann) qualify for a loan so he can make the improvements," Morton said. "It's a cultural asset that should not be thrown away."

"Kids will move in with rocks, and they'll trash the place and break all the windows. They have this pig-headed notion that they have to crack the whip over my landlord's head. I wish they would try to work with us instead of fighting us."

**Caption:** Doral Chenoweth III / Dispatch

From left, Ike Okafor-Newsum, James Morton and Nick Calderone discuss the problems at the *Milo* Arts Center in the building's lobby. Tenants of the building, at 617 E. 3rd Ave., could be evicted today.

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