What I Learned at Lunch With Marjorie

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An exorbitant rent increase is pushing Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) into a new location. AIDS advocate and icon Larry Kramer, a founder of GMHC, discusses the organization's future over lunch with Marjorie Hill, PhD, GMHC's current CEO.

Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) has been in its 14-story office building on West 24th Street for 14 years. It is named the Tisch Building. Joan Tisch was a devoted GMHC board member for many years, and the family continues to be a major donor. GMHC's lease on the Tisch Building is up. They must be out by the end of the year.

The roof leaks badly, the elevators need constant servicing (I personally am terrified to go into them), paint is peeling in too many places, the carpeting is ragged and ratty, the boiler caved in last year and had to be replaced or the clients would have frozen to death, the roof must be cleared of snow lest it cave in on their cafeteria, and the landlord, a greedy shit named Frank Ring, has not and will not attend to or contribute a penny to rectifying any of these.

Under the terms of their net lease he is not required to do so, but he is demanding an increase from the current $6.4 million a year to $9 million a year for a new lease of unguaranteed length

and with no attendance to any necessary repairs. In other words, take it or leave it as it is. GMHC quite rightly feels it has no choice but to leave it.

For the past two years GMHC, its real estate search team and, particularly, its indomitable chief executive officer Marjorie Hill, PhD, have been looking high and low for a better place to live, to house the staff of 175, the 700 volunteers and the 15,000 clients it services each year.

One would have thought that with the battered economy there would have been many places to choose from. One would have thought so, and one would have been wrong. Very wrong. Heartbreakingly wrong. Never-endingly wrong.

Finally, a new location has been identified, and negotiations are transpiring.

Hill is an imposing, strong, determined, passionate, exceedingly intelligent, nay brilliant and proud persona. She is a class act all the way. I have no idea if she is difficult to work for. I hope she is. She is too smart not to be. She wants better things for her cause, for her clients, for her organization, for her passionate devotion to LGBT anything and everything. She knows what she wants, and she knows what a pain in the ass it is to have to deal with trying to get any of it, and she is beyond pragmatically optimistic, bordering on being a dreamer, about how to bridge this gap. I never leave a meeting with her without being energized to try and do more myself.

I would not want her job in a million years, and I doubt, in these trying times, many other trained executives/social workers dependent on an increasingly selfish and uncaring world would want it either. How would you like to go out there and raise enough money for a $30 million annual budget when AIDS is now almost at the bottom of anybody's list of annual charitable donations? Gone are the days when gay men took care of their own. I don't know how she does it, but she does it. Failure is simply not a word in her vocabulary.

And she does it with this unflagging energy and a smile that should melt hearts if it were not coming from a regal six foot gorgeous black lesbian who is begging for money for a plague that still attacks primarily faggots and niggers and spics and junkies, all the people landlords still, in 2010, don't want to rent to.

I will never forget those early '80s when no one would rent to us, when the city, which still won't, wouldn't give us a closet or a nickel. To sit across the table with Hill in April of 2010 and hear the harrowing litany of the landlords and buildings and rental agents that still close their doors to us as potential tenants is to be forced yet again to face how many people hate us and won't have us, period, no matter how many millions of dollars GMHC can afford to pay for rent.

For those out there who have sent me anonymous complaints about this potential move I offer the above for some deep thinking and soul-searching. For the disgruntled employees who have e-mailed me and, it appears, others about their dissatisfactions about this move, I especially offer the above for some candid solace to please use for balm. (There is no such thing as a social organization that doesn't have disgruntled employees; their lives are too hard, their work is too

never-ending, their day-to-day existence is comprised of facing over and over again the pain and agony and unfairness of this world and this city and this plague.)

Change is always difficult. A new neighborhood. A new journey to get there every day. It is almost as if many of us would rather stay in the deteriorating shabbiness we live in than go out there and take two long years to try and find a cleaner bit of sunshine. (I understand. I offer the feeble example of our kitchen here where my partner and I live, which has been peeling over-generously for uncountable years.) We make do. Somehow New York itself encourages us to stay put. It's too uncomfortable on the outside. Another hundred people just got off the train, as Sondheim tells us. And of course many of those people are still carrying HIV.

Is this new office that Hill and her team have located a place she would be proud to take us on a tour of tomorrow? "Yes, it is," she proudly says. She cannot pinpoint its location for me while negotiations are still going on. It is Midtown somewhere near the Lincoln Tunnel. "I want someplace clean and wide and open, and this is it." Is it located too far from mass transit? "No further than where we are now from mass transit." Is it true clients will have to enter through the back door of this building (a rumor passing about). "We are being given a special entrance of our own in the front, just like we have now."

What about the curtailment of daily lunches in the cafeteria, which GMHC is famous for because they are so good? "You know, I want to try something different after 14 years of a cafeteria on the 12th floor. We will have a ground floor café, where equally nutritious food will be provided, and our current atmosphere of fun and camaraderie will be duplicated."

What about the location of the Michael Palm testing center on the current ground floor? "They are coming with us. The David Geffen center for education and outreach we hope to establish as a satellite center in a neighborhood more in need of such a place than Chelsea." Do you envision current clients refusing to come to this location? "Absolutely none. It will be a nice place, indeed a nicer place, to come to."

No, it makes no sense that greedy Mr. Ring is pushing them out the door, in so doing adding another empty building to several other empty Chelsea buildings he already is trying to find desperate tenants for (including the city, which almost paid him an exorbitant amount for another piece of shit before coming to its senses). The city (and life) is full of landlords like Frank Ring. To pay him $15 million dollars a year and still not get new rugs and a paint job and better elevators and a roof that doesn?t leak is not right, especially for the clients who need that money or the donors who gave it.

It's time to move on.

I'm actually grateful for these anonymous complaints and complainers that propelled Larry into his automatic "tell the world" mode. It has made me, and, now, I hope all of you, revisit the realties GMHC faces every minute and reach for my checkbook, as I also hope you all reach for yours. This organization started in my living room still gives me inordinate pride. (Of our six founders, Edmund

White, Larry Mass, MD, and I are alive.) Still, and continuing pride. And how many things in a life can one point to that has done and is continuing to do so much, so very much, that is good?

Yes, it is time to move on to a new home.

Stop complaining, you naysayers!

As the Brits say, Godspeed and God bless!

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