



Profile: Jacqueline Ravenscroft

Tenants' rights lawyer loves advocating for the basic human right to safe, stable housing

By **STEPHEN ELLISON**

Nowhere are tenants' rights and rent control issues more contentious than in the San Francisco Bay Area. And perhaps no one knows that better than Jacqueline Ravenscroft.

The partner with San Francisco-based Tobener Ravenscroft has been a tenants' and housing rights advocate for more than a decade with an outstanding record of holding landlords and property managers accountable for discrimination, harassment, wrongful eviction and uninhabitable repair issues she calls "slumlord conditions."

Ravenscroft's early career exposure to litigating against the bad landlord actors, who exploit the power they have over their tenants, was a key selling point for her venture into the specialty area. Not to mention, she was drawn to help those who are merely seeking the basic human need for fair, secure and permanent shelter.

"You can't have stable relationships; you can't have a productive work life; you can't have a successful trajectory in your life without clean and safe housing," she said. "There's a huge power dynamic, an imbalance between landlords and tenants, especially in areas of high (density) in California. That was always real interesting to me. And everyone's stories are really different. In most of my cases, I see greed as the driving force behind the landlord's bad actions. Why are they doing the things they're doing and trying to take advantage of people?"

The "why" for these landlords might oftentimes be the large amounts of cash they're able to bank after evictions or illegal rent hikes, but there's also the aspect of the power some landlords wield over renters, Ravenscroft said. From that perspective, she drew a comparison to another area of law she worked in: plaintiffs' employment law. Not only are employment and income also basic



Ravenscroft

human needs, but the same idea of power imbalance exists in the employer-employee relationship and among co-workers, she explained. In the workplace, there are people who work off their biases and discriminate against others or they act

out their own fears or they just take advantage of subordinates.

"I found that most of the work in that realm – and we were doing mostly sexual harassment cases and wrongful termination – was pre-litigation, serving demand letters," she recalled. "Also, most of it was very he-said-she-said. It was hard. It was harder for me to really dig myself into the pre-litigation realm."

"I think the same themes are present in both housing and employment," she continued. "But I just enjoy the process of litigation. I get those same stories and themes, but instead of doing that through pre-litigation, I get it in a much broader sense through the process of litigation and a lot of evidence and documents and videos. And that's fun."

The damages

To provide a better sense of the tenants' rights litigation Ravenscroft handles, she conjured up a hypothetical scenario: A woman named Jane, who was living in a rent-controlled San Francisco apartment for 20 years, paying \$1,000 a month for a place that has a fair market value of \$3,000 a month. One day, Jane gets an eviction notice indicating the landlord intends to move into the unit, which is legal.

"So, they evict Jane, and she moves out," Ravenscroft explained. "Then she sees that her apartment is on Airbnb, or there are new people living in it, and they've rented it for \$3,000. Well, Jane's lost the value of something that was worth \$3,000 that she was only paying \$1,000 for. So, her differential is \$2,000 a month, and the rent ordinance says that she can recover her rent differential of \$2,000 a month times however many years she would have lived there."

Under the hypothetical assumption that Jane would have lived in the unit for another 10 years, her differential would total \$240,000. Further, under the rent ordinance, that amount is automatically tripled as a penalty to the landlord in violation, she said. Finally, tack on emotional distress damages, which also can be tripled if there's a willful violation, and attorney fees.

"Those are the kind of cases that I take and the people I represent," Ravenscroft said.

From San Diego to San Francisco

Originally from San Diego, Ravenscroft trekked north for her undergrad studies at University of California, Santa Cruz, where she majored in politics and Latin American studies. She had designs on graduate school but never had any one subject in mind, so she took a year off from schooling and moved to San Francisco while she was "in limbo."

During that time, her initial thoughts were to become a college professor, so she applied to Ph.D. programs but also sent applications to law schools as a Plan B, she said. It wasn't until she struck up a conversation with one of her undergrad professors that law school started to become a more attractive option.

The professor's husband was a law professor, and when it came to "changing the world," the law degree made a huge



difference. He told Ravenscroft he always thought teaching was a world changer because it gives one the access to young students' minds and how they approach real-world issues. But his husband had the actual legal capacity to make such change through teaching and publishing.

"I really respected him, and I thought he had a pretty great life," she recalled. "He told me, 'Go to law school. It's only three years; you can always get a Ph.D. after that.' So, I went to law school and never applied to a Ph.D. program after that because I ended up really loving what I was doing."

During law school at UC Hastings, Ravenscroft had a summer internship at a plaintiffs' firm, doing landlord-tenant cases, personal injury and employment law. It was her first real application of the law, and she found it rewarding and enjoyable to be working on the side of the injured or wronged or displaced.

At the time, she hadn't been considering any particular area of law. In fact, she wasn't even certain she was going to use her law degree to practice law. But seeing a law practice in action that summer changed her mind and steered her interests toward becoming a civil litigator. She then got a closeup view of the law community through one of its professional organizations, and that seemingly was the topper.

"I got involved in SFTLA (San Francisco Trial Lawyers) around that time, and they did a really great job of hosting events that were highlighting a lot of successful female plaintiffs' trial lawyers," she recalled. "It was really nice to see those examples of women that had excelled in plaintiffs' side law, and you could tell they really enjoyed what they were doing."

Ravenscroft was hired on at the same firm where she interned and gained the experience over the next couple of years to land a more senior position, then a partnership with the Tobener firm. It was there she was able to focus exclusively on advocating for tenants' rights and rent control.

Cases of note

Ravenscroft's cases usually settle,

REDIRECT:

Getaway Spot: Anywhere there's water and wild
Go-To Music or Artist: Fleetwood Mac, Black Pumas, The Weeknd, Alabama Shakes, Aretha Franklin

Recommended Reading: Gabriel Garcia Marquez
Dream Job: Mine! In another life, I would probably be a great travel planner or closet organizer

Words to Live By: "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement ... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually." – Abraham Joshua Heschel

seldom going to trial because of the damages and attorney fees landlords would be responsible for if they were found in violation by the court. But there have been memorable ones because of their impact on her clients.

One such case involved an Asian woman in her early 30s who had been living in a rent-controlled apartment in San Francisco for about seven years. The 10-unit building was owned by an elderly couple whose son was the resident manager and was "just a creep," Ravenscroft said. "Whenever my client would ask for repairs, like the skylight was leaking or stuff stopped working like her heater, he would come into the unit himself and spend the whole day there not really fixing it, but just pretending to tinker around," she said. "And he would sexually harass her."

The manager, who lived in the unit below her, would send her vulgar texts late at night and send her birthday cards with inappropriate messages. One time he even told the woman to her face that he loved her. When Ravenscroft, in a deposition of the elderly father who owned the building, asked if he was surprised to be notified that his son had been accused of sexually harassing a tenant, he said no.

When the woman finally wrote a letter to the owners threatening legal action, they tried to evict her.

"So, it was kind of like a trifecta," Ravenscroft said. "You've got the bad repair conditions. You've got a sexual harassment by a landlord against a tenant. And then you've got a wrongful eviction or violation of the rent ordinance."

Another memorable case involved a Black woman in her 70s named Valerie who had lived in the same rent-controlled Oakland apartment for 20 years, raising two granddaughters while working for the city. She had recently retired when she received a notice from the landlord that the building was going up for sale, and the woman had 60 days to move out. Behind the scenes, Ravenscroft said, the landlord had been conspiring with a realtor to get a better selling price on the property by illegally evicting the long-term tenants first.

Ravenscroft's client didn't know any better and thought she had to move out. She had been paying at least \$2,000 below market rate, and ultimately paid double for a new place.

"So that was a pretty valuable case," she said. "And it was really rewarding because when we settled her case, Valerie said, 'You know, this is life-changing money. I'm going to buy a home with a pool so that my granddaughters can learn to swim. And I'm going to hire a swim instructor because my life dream has been to teach my granddaughters how to swim, and I haven't been able to accomplish that yet.' So that was really special."

Love for her city

When she's not in the office or taking depositions, Ravenscroft enjoys hiking and camping, but mostly exploring the city with her husband, two children and their dog. She said her neighborhood is in an area where they can walk to almost anything.

After the family returned from a recent trip to Atlanta for the holidays, Ravenscroft relished being back home.

"The first morning we were back and I got in my car to go to work, I thought to myself, 'We live in the most beautiful place.' Looking north, I can see Alcatraz, and then I looked at the Golden Gate



Bridge and all these beautiful homes and such beautiful architectures. I felt so lucky to be coming back here.”

When it comes to sage advice for young lawyers, Ravenscroft gave it some thought before coming to the conclusion that there’s nothing wrong with not having a plan – or even not having an answer to the question: “What are your plans?”

“Not knowing what you want to do straight out of law school or even a couple years down the line is OK,” she said. “Just keep exploring and thinking about what are the things that you enjoy in your job, and what don’t you enjoy. Do you enjoy working with people, with clients? What are the tasks you enjoy? What are the things that get you excited? Try to find something

that keeps that excitement going because you’re going to be a better lawyer and better serve your clients, whoever they are, if you enjoy what you’re doing.”

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