



- DANIEL BRAMZON -

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Tenants find an advocate in BASTA

>> A treacherous border-crossing from Mexico to the United States is the first barrier for many undocumented immigrants attempting to build better lives for their families. But once they're Stateside, the next challenge is to find livable housing, which is often no better than what they left behind. Many are limited to the least desirable neighborhoods, offering high crime rates and dilapidated apartments. Not long ago, when immigrants went without heat, faced vermin infestations or encountered contentious landlords, their best option was a backlogged Los Angeles Housing Department. That changed in January 2005, when Daniel Bramzon incorporated BASTA.

A graduate of the University of Chicago Law School, Bramzon was once a corporate litigator at the prestigious

Century City firm Christensen, Miller, Fink, Jacobs, Glaser, Weil & Shapiro, LLP (now Christensen, Glaser, Fink, Jacobs, Weil & Shapiro). One night, while working late, a janitor who knew that Bramzon is the son

of a Mexican immigrant, handed him an eviction notice and asked him

what to do. "In the process of helping her through the eviction," Bramzon says, "I thought there must be a way to help these people in an affordable way, because their homes were at stake. After I left the law firm, I decided to help people in similar circumstances." He named the nonprofit organization after the word for "enough" in Spanish. To inspire tenants

to act, BASTA adopted a forceful motto: "If the landlord wants a fight, we'll give the landlord a fight!"

Nine attorneys now fight for tenants' rights at BASTA's MacArthur Park headquarters and its satellite office in Lancaster, many of whom once worked at high-profile law firms and were happy to return to the altruistic idealism that first attracted them to law. BASTA's litigation is divided into two departments: eviction defense and class/mass action. To fund its mission, BASTA accepts private donations, attorney fee awards and contingent fee cases. Clients pay a fixed \$400 rate for BASTA to handle the case through trial, a fee the organization considers waiving on a case-by-case basis. "Most other nonprofit groups accept federal money, which restricts their ability to help undocumented people or people below the poverty line," says Bramzon. "We represent any person who walks or wheels themselves through the door, regardless of race, immigration status or financial status."

Lupe (last name withheld) is a BASTA success story. She crossed the Mexican border in March 1973 "to get a better chance, better money than Mexico," eventually winding up in South Los Angeles, a section of the city brimming with BASTA clients. Lupe didn't have any family or friends in L.A., but chose the city for its reputed wealth of opportunities. She and her husband are currently

unemployed, relying on welfare to subsist and care for their American-born children.

Lupe was BASTA's lead plaintiff in a mass action lawsuit against her landlord. She describes her previous apartment as "un desastre" – a disaster – with scurrying rats and roaches, and no working pipes or heaters. "The landlord had allowed Lupe's building to severely dilapidate over a period of 10 years – to such an extent that the city attorney had initiated criminal prosecution against the landlord," says Bramzon. "Unfortunately, Lupe could not afford legal help, and all the other organizations where she sought such help were either unwilling or unable to assist her and all the neighbors." That's when BASTA stepped in, stymieing a retaliatory eviction filing and securing relocation fees for Lupe and her neighbors, many of whom now live in habitable buildings.

BASTA attorneys, staff and volunteers spend much of their time documenting hundreds of apartments citywide. And Bramzon says he is constantly surprised by the "truly inhumane conditions" that Angelenos endure. He's encountered walls without drywall, ceilings with holes, and floors so rotten from water damage that he could see into the downstairs apartment.

According to Bramzon, he has also witnessed landlords hiring workers to level walls while tenants are still living inside. Lead paint was eliminated in 1978, but