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Sunday, Oct 22, 2006

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Alice in no man's land

West St. Paul officials have taken unusual steps to rid the city of a nuisance: They seek a one-year order barring a resident from her home, which police say is used as a flophouse.

BY BRIAN BONNER
Pioneer Press

GET TO KNOW THE IMPRESSIVELY AGILE SATURN AURA. STARTING AT \$29,895*, IT'S

Alice Krengel, West St. Paul's No. 1 public nuisance, is living on the streets again — for the third time in six years.

The city says Krengel has been using her home for years as a flophouse for criminals, drunks and drug users. Police went to her house 41 times this year alone. Deciding enough was enough, the city forced Krengel out on Aug. 7 and boarded up the home.

Her status as a homeless woman who owns her own home makes her an anomaly. But her alcoholism, which she admits, and possible mental illness, which she disputes, make her more typical of Minnesota's chronic homeless.

City officials are fed up after having spent hundreds of hours and thousands of taxpayer dollars responding to problems at 823 Allen Ave. Her neighbors and relatives are just as exasperated.

City Attorney Kori Land went to court last Tuesday to ask that Krengel be barred from her own home for a year for habitually violating the state's public nuisance law.

Krengel, 55, has been on the streets almost three months, after a temporary court order in the city's favor. She is guilty of trespassing if she sets foot on her property without police escort or permission.

District Judge Leslie Metzen is expected to rule on the proposed one-year expulsion in November. The judge will decide how much nuisance a city is forced to tolerate from one household and how far officials can go in separating someone from his or her property.

"This is the first time I've heard of somebody who is homeless and has a house," said Laura Kadwell, the state's director for ending long-term homelessness. "It sounds to me like somebody should be advocating for her and looking at mental health and chemical dependency issues."

Land said the city has simply run out of options. "The city's resources have been expended over the last six years to the point of exhaustion," she said.

Land said officials would rather take the responsibility for ensuring the security of Krengel's vacant house than continually respond to problems when she and her guests stay there.

The city's goal in removing Krengel from her house, Land said, is to "break the cycle" and force her to disassociate from troubling acquaintances who use her and her house, with or without her permission.

The one-year ban is an unusual remedy, Land said, but justified by Krengel's inability to control what happens on her property.

"My hope is that she will get help in that year," Land said. "Believe me, I am looking for any creative solution I can find. The city wants to get to the heart of the problem so it doesn't continue a year from now."

SEES HERSELF AS A VICTIM

Krengel showed up for Tuesday's court hearing wearing dark blue shorts and a blue tie-dye T-shirt. She carried her ever-present drink tumbler that she regularly refills with Diet Pepsi.

When she's sober, Krengel can be well-spoken and outgoing. When she's drunk, she is known to be foul-mouthed and capable of violent outbursts.

In January 2003, Krengel pleaded guilty to hitting a tenant over the head with a frying pan, an assault she still denies.

While West St. Paul is in the heart of the metropolitan area, the St. Paul suburb of 20,000 residents has intimate features of small-town life. Officials have come to know Krengel well.

As a rookie police officer in 1988, part of Police Chief Bud Shaver's orientation tour included a stop at Krengel's house. Eighteen years later, veterans still tell rookies "they'll meet Alice quite frequently during their shifts," Shaver said.

Outside of her official duties, Land has had pleasant conversations with Krengel at St.



CRAIG BORCK, Pioneer Press

Alice Krengel stands in the spot where she sleeps on a mat on the floor in the Dorothy Day Center. Despite owning her own home in West St. Paul, Alice Krengel is homeless. Years of alcoholism and problem police calls to her house have exhausted the city's patience.

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Matthew's Catholic Church on St. Paul's West Side, where the attorney has served meals to the homeless.

"Actually, I feel bad for Alice," Land said.

But Krengel sees none of the concern and compassion.

She sees herself as the victim of a conspiracy between city officials and Metzen, the judge. She said police are picking on her while ignoring more serious crimes taking place in the neighborhood.

Their goal, she said, is to seize her two-story, four-bedroom house and subdivide her large lot for a new house and extra tax revenue. The officials are seeking to accomplish their mission, Krengel said, by keeping her out of her home long enough for her to fall behind on bills.

"I would rather have had 30 days in jail instead of this," Krengel said. "It's inhumane. We don't treat dogs like this."

Krengel's lawyer, Julia Althoff, is asking Metzen to let Krengel return home.

SIMILAR ORDERS TWICE BEFORE

A.

Althoff said conditions at the house have improved since Krengel entered into an agreement with the city on Aug. 22, 2005, to stay sober, not permit alcohol in the house and allow police officers inside for random inspections.

"She said it would get better, and it got better," Althoff said.

Krengel, acknowledging that she has trouble controlling who comes and goes from her house, said she sought restraining orders to prevent four men from coming onto her property.

But West St. Paul officials told Metzen that Krengel has repeatedly violated terms of the August 2005 agreement.

In the last six years, police have documented 180 trips to Krengel's house. Responding officers have measured blood-alcohol levels of 0.30 percent or higher in men at the home. Officers have gotten infested with fleas while inspecting the home.

Neighbors living on each side of Krengel's home told Metzen they are relieved to have her gone.

Tim Stiles started keeping a written log in recent years but didn't call police about minor incidents, such as public urination and loud arguments. "It was a revolving door as far as tenants," Stiles said.

Another neighbor, Mike Frame, said the men who hung out at Krengel's house were mainly concerned with "drinking, arguing and partying."

The city has gotten court orders to kick Krengel out of her house twice before, in 2000 and 2003. Inspectors both times declared the home unfit for human habitation, mainly because of unsanitary conditions. Krengel said they caught her both times on bad housekeeping days.

She was out of her house for about a year the first time and re-entered after a childhood acquaintance who owns a small construction company fixed the problems. She was out for about three months the second time.

Also in 2000, Dakota County social workers found her to be an unfit mother and removed the youngest two of her three children, sons who are now 20 and 15. Her oldest child, a daughter now 31, left home in 1993 at age 18. The subject of her children brings Krengel to tears.

Krengel traces her problems to early childhood and blames her adoptive parents for favoring her three adopted sisters. She said she is an outcast from her family, which includes an elderly mother in Eagan.

'OUT OF TOUCH WITH REALITY'

Two of Krengel's relatives are not necessarily opposed to what West St. Paul is doing, as long as the judge or someone else orders her to submit to inpatient chemical-dependency treatment and undergo a mental health evaluation.

Krengel's younger sister, Diane Krengel Reinhardt, 53, of Langdon, N.D., and Krengel's daughter, Angela Hall, of Burnsville, came to Tuesday's court hearing.

"I don't think kicking her out for a year is going to solve anything unless she has six months of inpatient treatment followed by six months in the halfway house," Hall said. "Her reality is different from normal reality."

"By taking her out of the house, we're not tackling the issue," Krengel Reinhardt said.

"We need to get her into a safe environment."

Hall said she never had a mother-daughter relationship with Krengel. At age 12, Hall started calling her Alice, rather than mom. Once she moved out, she "pretty much never looked back," Hall said.

Krengel never married, Hall said, and the three siblings each have different fathers. After her two brothers were removed, Hall said Krengel — who's always had trouble getting and keeping jobs — lost her welfare checks and turned to boarders as a source of income.

"I don't know what went wrong. It's pretty bad when your mom's at the bottom of society. It hurts," Hall said. "She has given up a lot for alcohol. She gave up her children for alcohol. She's given up herself as a person for alcohol."

Shortly after the hearing, Krengel expressed anguish over the fate of her beloved cats, which she has been unable to locate for many days. "This is probably tearing me apart more than any other factor . . .," she wrote in a fax to the Pioneer Press.

The sentiment doesn't surprise her sister. "She cares more about her cats than her kids," Krengel Reinhardt said.

Contrary to her sister's claims of growing up in an abusive family, Krengel Reinhardt said "we all were treated extremely well by our family, including Alice, who was spoiled rotten." Their father, who died in 1995, paid off Krengel's mortgage in 1991.

Krengel Reinhardt said her older sister showed early promise, but also the same traits that seem to have blossomed into mental illness: an inability to comprehend the consequences of her actions and denial of reality.

"Nothing has ever been her fault her whole life," Krengel Reinhardt said. "That goes back to baseball games" when she refused to acknowledge being out on a play.

At Krengel's best, she was physically attractive and "a brilliant, top-notch, straight-A student without opening a book," Krengel Reinhardt said. The sister traced the start of Krengel's descent into drinking to her college days in Bozeman, Mont.

After the court hearing, Krengel Reinhardt offered to take her sister back to North Dakota with her. But Krengel spurned the invitation.

While Krengel admits that her neighborhood is not the best place for her, with the temptations of Marty's Bar and 40 Acres Liquor Store less than a block away, she won't consider selling the house where she's lived since 1987. It's worth an estimated \$183,000.

"I'll die fighting for what I believe in most," Krengel said. "That is my house."

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