

# BLOCK PARTY

KC TENANTS' MONTH OF ACTIVISM BROKE THE SYSTEM BY EMILY COX

**Daniel Halferty** was behind on rent. “When I made a partial payment in October, [my landlord] texted me, berating me.”

Halferty had been hunting for a job since April, but with a history of cancer and traumatic brain injury, he was cautious about finding a job that would be fairly safe from COVID-19.

Halferty started his new job at the end of November, and made a payment plan to catch up on past-due rent. That was fine with his landlord, Ellis Real Estate, until Halferty asked to delay just 2 weeks, so he could prevent his utilities from being shut off. Then his landlord stopped communicating.

“They just cut out all communication to me, and then Christmas Eve, we had the notice from the lawyer on our door that we were going to be sued for \$2,925. They had 30 days to collect the payment and get the apartment back.”

Evictions are still happening during the pandemic in Kansas City. Thousands of Kansas Citians have been in Halferty’s shoes in the last year: lost income due to the pandemic, a good faith effort to work with their landlord, and still, being tossed out of their home.

KC Tenants declared the first month of the year Zero Eviction January. Through disruptions in person, online, and on the phone, the organization prevented 919 eviction hearings from happening in both Jackson and Clay Counties—90 percent of all those scheduled for the month. Halferty was one of the tenants whose hearing was continued to a later date, during which time he was able to borrow money to pay the landlord and find and move into a new home.

Of KC Tenants, Halferty says, “Their work is lifesaving.”

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KC Tenants was founded just two years ago, in February of 2019. They’ve wasted no time in making change: from their influence on the 2019 municipal elections, to creating the city’s Tenant Bill of Rights, to organizing tenant unions, and shutting down evictions. “In some way, we are still a very baby organization,” says Tara Raghuvver, director of KC Tenants. “And in other ways we’ve built a highly sophisticated, radical group of people who are ready to do what it takes to defend

their neighbors and defend themselves.”

KC Tenants began interceding in eviction proceedings last summer, after the initial pandemic eviction moratorium expired at the end of May. The moratorium had been enacted by then-presiding judge of the 16th Circuit Court, which covers Jackson County, so KC Tenants pressured him to renew it. He did not rise to the occasion, and evictions returned to Jackson County last summer.

So they pivoted to the strategy of “If we don’t get it, shut it down,” which also serves well as a chant at their rallies. They began interrupting eviction courts, making it impossible for dockets to be heard. “We did a one-off disruption in July,” says Raghuvver. “We did a bigger, more orchestrated disruption in October that was extremely successful. And then we ended up seeing some results out of that in the next couple weeks.” One result of their continued disruptions in November was Judge Mary Weir ceasing to hear evictions, both online and in-person, through the end of 2020.

A new presiding judge took over the 16th Circuit Court at the beginning of the year: Judge Dale Youngs. “Our posture from the beginning was this guy is not an immediate target until he proves himself to be a target,” says Raghuvver. “He could potentially do the right thing on day one and end evictions and it could be a new era for the 16th Circuit Court. Of course, he did not do that.”

In December, KC Tenants had tried to get a meeting with Judge Youngs, to advocate for an eviction moratorium. “No response,” says Raghuvver. “We had people email him, no response. On Christmas, we had a small group of people go and peacefully carol at his house in the middle of day, no cameras, no news, just to see if we could talk to him and get a meeting, no response.”

So after months of sporadic disruptions, with no signs that the presiding judge would halt evictions, they committed to Zero Eviction January. “We really started preparing for the fact that we have to show up for tenants and keep them in their homes,” says Jenay Manley, a leader and Black Organizing Fellow with KC Tenants. “January is one of the coldest months of the year, it’s one of the highest months of evictions in a normal year, and we’re about to have a flood because the CDC moratorium is about to end.”



Their campaign produced a month like no other. Raghuvver, who is also behind the data-driven KC Eviction Project, says, “I’ve stared at this eviction data for like eight years of my life and there’s never been a month like the last month, where the courts just literally couldn’t hear ninety percent of the evictions that they had scheduled.”

Their strategy was multi-faceted: daily calls and emails to pressure various political targets, physically blocking courthouse doors on eviction hearing days, disrupting

online and teleconference proceedings, and rallies outside judges’ homes to make their message clear. Their rallying cry throughout the month was that every eviction is an act of violence.

## WEEK ONE

In the first week of January, KC Tenants’ actions forced 323 hearings to be delayed. They shut down eviction proceedings at both Jackson County courthouses with in-person



rallies, but most of the work of interrupting court happened out of sight and online.

Since early in the pandemic, many court proceedings have been done remotely, using either teleconference lines, Webex video conferencing, or both. Each judge and court may handle their proceedings differently. Evictions are heard in as many as four courtrooms, with both afternoon and evening dockets. This means KC Tenants was facilitating up to eight separate disruption crews successfully.

One of the people coordinating this work is Bonnie (who asked to be identified by first name only, due to the possible legal issues that come with interrupting court proceedings). Bonnie isn't a Kansas Citian—she is a homeowner ally who lives about an hour outside of the metro. When a friend shared info last year about what KC Tenants was doing, and that she could help from afar, she got involved. “Once I'd done [an action] once,” says Bonnie, “I was totally hooked.”

Disruptors call or log in to the court's

hearing, often using false names, and wait for proceedings to start. As soon as the judge calls the first case on the docket, interruption begins. They use the same script, the words growing in power with repetition. Initially speakers go one at a time, but as court administrators mute speakers, disruptors jump in as they can, creating a cacophony of voices offering support to tenants and condemning the judges' actions.

“[The script] feels really powerful to say,” says Bonnie, “and the things we say in

Above and pg 8: KC Tenants gathered at the downtown Jackson County Courthouse on January 7th, blockading both of the courthouse's main entrances demanding a cease to evictions.

CHASE CASTOR

that script, they're just as much for the tenants to hear as they are for the judge. Letting tenants know it's not their fault. We're here in solidarity. We also tell the judges that they have a choice and every eviction is an act of violence. So it serves that dual purpose of telling the judge what they're doing is wrong,



but also telling the tenants we're here to help, people out there do care."

"We've had phone calls with tenants, afterwards," says Bonnie, "saying even though we've only been able to delay their hearing for three weeks, they say, 'We didn't know anyone cared.' And this gives them time to figure things out." An additional three weeks can

be critical for a family trying to find another place to live.

"We've had tenants who've called who are like 'I didn't know that anyone had my back until I heard you guys on the call,' who are now a part of KC Tenants," says Jenay Manley. "That's power: knowing that your neighbor has your back, not because they

said it, but because they showed up and shut down eviction courts, and now you are also committed to showing up and shutting down eviction court. That's power."

That's a key part of what KC Tenants does: care for neighbors is shown not just with words, but with action. "This group doesn't just have meetings and talk about problems all day long," says Bonnie. "They actually get out and do stuff. And it's actually helping people."

Supporters from outside the metro, like Bonnie, were essential in KC Tenant's success in shutting down evictions in January. Raghuvier says, "We have people from Seattle and Maine and Los Angeles shutting down eviction court in Kansas City. The online disruptions are not only a super acceptable and COVID-safe way to take a pretty radical action, it's also a way for communities where evictions are not happening right now to show radical solidarity with us. And it's just the embodiment to me of what solidarity means: taking action for someone you don't even know, someone you're not even a neighbor to, just making sure their eviction doesn't get to happen that day."

The campaign also featured daily emails to supporters with calls to action that could

**"THIS WAS VIOLENCE WHEN THEY KNOCKED ON HIS DOOR. THIS WAS VIOLENT WHEN THEY EVICTED HIM FROM HIS HOUSE. WHEN THE JUDGE DECIDED TO EVICT HIM, IT WAS VIOLENT. BUT PEOPLE ONLY SEE IT AS VIOLENCE WHEN A GUN IS SHOT AND A TENANT IS IN THE HOSPITAL."**



be taken from anywhere. Over the course of the month, the email list for these actions grew to over 450 participants. The actions often included calling, emailing, and faxing Judge Youngs' office. They also included calls to City Councilpeople to advocate for an eviction moratorium as well as the cancellation of rent, including rent debt. "A eviction moratorium without rent cancellation will only burden tenants with debt that will lead to evictions once the moratorium is lifted," reads the action email. "That ain't right." Their mobilization to contact Congressman Emmanuel Cleaver mid-month elicited words of support from him, when he released a statement calling on Biden's administration to strengthen the national eviction moratorium.

Their demands became even more resonant when, on Friday, January 8, Civil Process Deputies shot a tenant, Eric Smith, three times as they evicted him from his home. Smith's family had informed the court that Smith was having a mental health crisis, and requested they bring a mental health counselor with them. They did not.

As this tenant went to the hospital in serious condition, KC Tenants mobilized. "So that day was actually pretty emotional," says Jenay Manley. "We had been spending days, months naming that every eviction is an act of violence. And because this was the most brutal version of violence, it is easily seen. But this was violence before a tenant was shot. This was violence when they knocked on his door. This was violent when they evicted him from his house. When the judge decided to evict him, it was violent. But people only see it as violence when a gun is shot and a tenant is in the hospital."

"Black people are harassed every day," says Manley. "We can't just say that we matter after we die. We can't just say people matter after they are shot. We have to matter from the jump—especially in a pandemic where we know the only way that people can stay safe is by staying in their house. The violence happens the moment that he was given an eviction notice."

The afternoon of the deputies' shooting, KC Tenants put out a call to action. And with just a few hours notice, 80 supporters gathered in midtown, and marched a few blocks to Judge Dale Youngs' house for accountability. The Civil Process Deputies are officers of the court, and ultimately answer to him.

The crowd gathered outside Youngs' home, with chants and speeches and a banner that read, "Judge Youngs, you have blood on your hands?" Judge Youngs did not answer a knock on his door, but the protestors left a letter for him, and the banner hanging behind. They were gone in less than an hour. The purpose wasn't to get arrested—but to make their point and go home.

## WEEK TWO

Their message to Youngs appeared to be ef-



fective. On Monday morning, January 11, Judge Youngs announced a two week eviction moratorium—a true moratorium: no eviction summons, no hearings, no writs of execution. The reasons cited in his administrative order included concerns about "social and political unrest" and the safety of Court staff.

Jenay Manley balked at the irony of the order: "When you talk about, 'Oh, well, for the safety of our employees we're going to suspend evictions,' but you don't have that same need to keep people safe in their home—You could've suspended evictions for the safety of tenants. The CDC named that that's the only way to keep people safe. But you do it for the safety of your employees because there's protests outside. The judges were uncomfortable, not unsafe. But tenants are unsafe."

While a two week stay on evictions aided the goal of zero evictions for the month, it was a small win. "An eviction moratorium is a bandaid," says Manley. "It is a must—we have to end all evictions right now, and I think that Judge Dale Youngs has the power to do it, and he should. I think it is only moral, it is only right. But more importantly, I think we need to cancel rent, and forgive the debt that has been accrued by tenants throughout this pandemic. I think that is the long term solution to keep tenants from falling into deep holes of depression and debt in the middle of a pandemic that we know is no fault of their own."

There is precedent and support for an eviction moratorium. The presiding judge of the 22nd Circuit Court in St. Louis, Judge Youngs' counterpart on that side of the state, has enacted a moratorium there for the entirety of the pandemic. Other cities and states are doing the same. Mayor Quinton Lucas publicly called for the courts here to enact a moratorium in December. But Kansas

KC Tenants walk to Judge Kyndra Stockdale's home, where they held a rally demanding Judge Stockdale end her eviction hearings. They left their demands and a banner on her front door. © CHASE CASTOR



Citizens are still being evicted.

While the CDC order against evictions has been in effect since September, it offers only limited protection. The tenant must file a specific document stating their eligibility. It only protects tenants who are past due on rent for COVID-related reasons. Landlords can still file evictions and take them to court and argue against them. What KC Tenants, Mayor Lucas, and other tenant advocates are calling for is a stop to all filings, hearings, writs, and enforcement.

"Eviction is already a fundamentally traumatic event, both a cause and a condition of poverty," wrote Mayor Lucas in his public letter to Judge Youngs.

"Evictions cause serious health and economic crises, exacerbating harms from

the pandemic itself," continued Mayor Lucas. "Homelessness and relocation stress add another barrier for the unemployed and working class as they strive to enter the workforce. Further, landlords file evictions at disproportionate rates in Black and Brown neighborhoods, reinforcing decades of racial inequities."

A recent study in Oregon showed that the downstream cost of evictions to the government was many times greater than the cost of current rent debt in the state. That is, it would be cheaper for the government to pay tenants' back rent, keeping them in their homes, than to pay for the additional costs of emergency housing, medical services, and more, that are caused by a mass eviction of people in crisis.



And the current court processes pose problems of inaccessibility and inequality. Remote hearings can be an obstacle, especially for tenants who are elderly or disabled. “The online evictions are immoral,” says Manley. “It is wrong to assume that tenants have access to conference calls or Web Ex in order to be evicted from their home. You have to have access to stable internet when you don’t have stable housing. You have to have access to stable connection on phones when you don’t have access to stable housing. That’s unacceptable.”

On Tuesday, January 12, KC Tenants rallied at the Office of Civil Process for accountability for wrongs done in the process of evictions. They rallied for Eric Smith, who had been shot 4 days prior, and for Anthony Stinson, a single dad of kids aged 10 and 2.

Back in December, Stinson was surprised to find an eviction notice on his door, telling him to vacate. He’d never received a court summons. Records show that it was served to a Jane Doe. “Unless they served my 10 year old daughter,” says Stinson, “there is no Jane Doe. Judge Kyndra Stockdale then issued a default eviction judgment against me in December. I should have been protected by the CDC moratorium, but how could I fight for myself if I didn’t know I was being taken to court?”

He didn’t get the opportunity. In January, “the court’s deputies showed up at my door. It was pouring rain and 20 degrees. They told me to grab what I could and get out of there, so they could get out of the rain. They said I could come back to get my stuff. They lied to me. When I left that day, the landlord changed the locks. They never intended to let me back in.” He didn’t have many of his things, including his daughter’s school supplies or his medications.

On the January 12 rally at the Office of Civil Process, KC Tenants stood alongside him to demand a meeting. “They refused,” says Stinson. “But we didn’t back down. We hollered at the doors till they were forced to make a deal with me. I’m getting my stuff back tomorrow.”

### WEEK 3

The third week of January, with the two-week eviction moratorium still in place, KC Tenants focused their energy on new targets: rallying at the homes of Judge Kyndra Stockdale, in Mission Hills, and Judge Mary Weir, in Brookside.

KC Tenants gathered at the downtown Jackson County Courthouse on January 28th, blockading both of the courthouse’s main entrances demanding a cease to evictions. Many citizens tried to make it through the doors but were denied entrance and had to use a back entrance. Landlords, tenants, people with criminal hearings, and folks report for property tax purposes were among some of the citizens forced to use the back entrance that day. © CHASE CASTOR

KC Tenants sought to call out judges for their complicity in a system that removes people from their homes during a pandemic, in the heart of winter, and called on the judges to use their judicial authority and discretion to halt evictions in their courtrooms.

As people gathered in the parking lot of Country Club Christian Church on the evening of January 19, preparing to march to Judge Stockdale's home, Raghuvver gave the rundown for the evening. She acknowledged that this might be out of folks' comfort zone. Surrounded by 75 or so working class, multi-racial people in one of the wealthiest areas of the metro, she said, "This is a scary part of town for most of us."

The marching crowd's energetic chants—"Judge Stockdale, where do you stand, people are dying, you have blood on your hands!"—rang particularly loud in that quiet, spacious neighborhood that likely hasn't seen a protest in decades.

Jenay Manley's twin children were with her at the rally, on the eve of their seventh birthday. "As we were walking on the street, [my son] said, 'Mom, why are these houses so big?' I told him it's because it's the judge's house. He said, 'This is the judge that evicts people from apartments?' ...Yea, man!"

Stockdale has evicted more tenants than any other judge in the 16th Circuit, according

to KC Tenants, having heard at least 835 cases since June, with at least 361 of those receiving formal eviction judgements.

The rally gathered outside Judge Stockdale's large brick mansion—the only home on the block with its lights out, with a cluster of police watching from down the block, a helicopter lurking overhead, and neighbors peering out their front doors. Protestors held signs reading, "End Evictions" and "You have a choice." As speakers called for an end to the violence of evictions, a huge shooting star streaked across the sky.

The next day, KC Tenants expanded their court disruptions to Clay County for the first time, preventing 37 eviction hearings from happening. The next week, Clay County preemptively continued all their cases, rightly anticipating that KC Tenants planned to disrupt again.

## WEEK 4

Judge Youngs' two-week moratorium lapsed on January 24, which meant if evictions were to be halted, it would be up to KC Tenants. They did as they promised, rallying at the downtown courthouse doors on Thursday, January 28, in 25° weather for two hours. "The cavalry isn't coming," said KC Tenants leader Quadafi to the rally that day, "we're the

cavalry."

Energy remained high despite the cold. The morning was launched with music booming across the courthouse's plaza, including "Guillotine" by The Coup and its cheery chorus: "We got the guillotine! You better run!"

While the blocking of courthouse doors is largely symbolic—most hearings happen online, and sheriffs were ushering people around to get access through the employee door—it was not an empty gesture. When tenants arrived at the court building and saw KC Tenants proclaiming that evictions must end, there were also KC Tenants members ready on the sidewalks to talk to them about what they were doing and offer support.

In addition to impeding traffic into the courthouse, the rally was a very obvious, bright spectacle. Cars honked as they passed. A Downtown Ambassador stopped what he was doing across the street and watched, eventually crossing to take a photo, saying "I'm with y'all."

The spectacle continues the work of KC Tenants in letting people know that they are here and they care. Their presence and their action is a balm to the many Kansas Citians who are feeling beat down, especially over the last year. Even if you aren't immediately facing eviction, it can be heartening to know

there are people showing up with their bodies, in the cold, to stand up for their neighbors. To see that the people have power and are fighting back against injustice.

A man came by the courthouse to pay his taxes, and Raghuvver explained to him what was happening. She got on the mic and told the rally about the interaction: "I said 'sir, we're stopping evictions.' He said, 'the president still hasn't signed a damn bill?!' That's right. So the people who are out here today, even the ones who aren't here regarding landlord-tenant court, they know that we have tenants' backs, and they know that we shouldn't have to do this shit. We shouldn't have to stand out here. Our toes shouldn't have to be this damn cold. We shouldn't have to shut it down. But. If they don't fucking act, if the president doesn't sign the damn bill, if Youngs doesn't do the thing he has the authority to do, if Judge Youngs doesn't end evictions, then we will shut it down!"

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And for an entire month, they did. "The fact that they were able to stop over 900 evictions is just incredible," says Bonnie. "When you think about how many lives that affected, how many families that affected, it's a huge number of people that now have at least a few

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more weeks to try and figure things out and still have a safe place to call home.”

After a month of intense, continuous action, KC Tenants learned what they are made of. That was part of the challenge from the beginning. Raghuvver says, “We wanted to see: Can we pull this off? Do we have enough people? What degree of organizing do we need to be able to execute on something like this? And who do we need to develop into what kind of leadership roles to pull it off?”

Manley was awed by the way people showed up. “The whole team just threw down. It was—wow.”

At the end of the month, they tallied it up, and found that 64 leaders took on new roles. “That’s 64 leaders in Kansas City now,” says Raghuvver, “whose lives are transformed, who have a new analysis of their own power, our collective power, and are ready to wield that power in a really radical direction. Once people feel the power of collective action, once people are politicized in public—you can’t undo that, you can’t untransform someone’s life after that transformation has occurred.”

Bonnie is one of the people who stepped up this month. “I’ve never been a part of something like this before. I heard Tara one time say, ‘Charity is not liberation.’ I keep thinking of that. All the things I’d tried to do before to help make the world a better place was just charity, it wasn’t actually building power, which is what KC Tenants is all about, it’s about building people power. And that’s just been such a huge paradigm shift for me.”

“My kids know,” says Manley, “they’re not going to an action for someone else, they’re not going to an action for some feeling of like ‘oh look at what we did.’ No, they’re going because they know it will be us. This is not like a volunteer thing. This is not something we show up for other people—we show up for one another, that means you and me. I think every time my kids show up to an action, they get this clear political understanding of what it means to build collectiveness.”

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So what’s next? This campaign built the breadth and depth of their power, and now they must decide how to wield it.

During their debrief after the last eviction shutdowns, they realized, says Raghuvver, “if an action needed to occur that night at 7 p.m., we have everything we need to go pull it off, and not just pull it off, but pull it off really excellently. We have a security team, we have police liaisons, we have people running press, we have amazing powerful spokespeople, we’ve got an art team, we’ve got people who are ready to do childcare for the parents who have to bring their kids, we’ve got ride plans, we’ve got a medic team. The kind of infrastructure we’ve been able to build in the last month sets us up for success.”

Their infrastructure also includes a re-

search and data team tracking what is happening in the courts. “We scrape the courts websites, multiple times a week, every week, so we have the most accurate numbers on this out of anyone.”

Now that KC Tenants has a handle on how courts function and what they need to interrupt those functions, they are a well-oiled machine. “It was initially a ton of work for me to figure out, and our data team to figure out,” says Raghuvver, “like how do we get all the info that we need. At this point, we’ve done this shit like fifteen times. I could set up the infrastructure for a given week in like 30 minutes.”

The first week of February, with no fanfare or publicity, they decided to show up to remote hearings for Eastern Jackson County. “We noticed that 95 people were on the eviction docket in Independence, in the Eastern Jackson County courthouse,” says Raghuvver. “So we organized literally four people to go shut that down. Another 95 evictions are now delayed at least a couple weeks.”


So as their group strategizes what’s next, Raghuvver says, it’s possible that Zero Eviction January becomes Zero Eviction 2021. At the same time, she says, “I think there’s a real recognition that we can’t just run ourselves into the ground doing what is, in essence, reactive organizing.”

The organization had paused other projects as they dedicated all their power to blocking the month’s evictions. “So for example, we’re trying to launch a campaign to win a housing trust fund that we the people design, as opposed to nonprofits and developers,” says Raghuvver. “And we want it to be a campaign that is funded by defunding the police. That’s a whole multiyear effort that we’re about to kick off, that we actually need to kick off, if we’re ever going to be in a world where we’re not just fighting against every eviction at every turn.”

They’re also working on building a network of tenant unions across the city. They spent the summer and fall dropping flyers with tenant resources at 10,000 doors. These larger-scale, power-building projects are critical to making substantial long-term change in the city.

Whatever comes next, this month has strengthened them for it. “If the leaders and tenants decide that they want to keep doing this,” says Bonnie, “then me and a whole lot of other people are ready to throw down with them and make sure it stops.”

“KC Tenants has been the first invitation for a lot of our people into public and political life,” says Raghuvver, “but now that they’re here, now that they’re politicized, now that they’re clear on their power and our collective power, they’re not going anywhere.”

She continues, “We are growing a powerful and undeniable base of poor and working class people in Kansas City who are fed up and they are ready to do what it takes to fight for what they are owed.” 

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