

"The tenants
I've rented to,
they love me.
The ones I've said no,
it's society's fault.
[But] I'm not
the only one
who's turned
them down."

— Ronnie Bourgeois



MID-STREAM:
Rental middleman
Ronnie Bourgeois'
office is on Route 28
in West Dennis, near
Bass River.

APPLICANTS:
Bourgeois handles the
paperwork.

THIS MIDDLEMAN MOVES FAST TO PUT ROOFS OVER PEOPLE'S HEADS

By Dan Hamilton

Photos by Barry A. Donahue

Ronnie Bourgeois is a middleman positioned between renters and landlords who uses mental images of "good" and "bad" to help him make quick judgments.

Working the financial bottom of the market as his chosen niche, Bourgeois can describe ideal tenants and landlords, and just as quickly rattle off

stereotypes of nightmare renters and owners.

He has to move fast, or else he wouldn't be able to make what he says is about 100 grand a year, gross, in commissions. He earns the money representing landlords and placing tenants in low-end, often subsidized housing, mostly in the mid-Cape, but as far east as Truro, with a few units in Orleans and Chatham.

In other words, Ronnie has no time (or sympathy) for losers who wreck apartments, don't pay on time, or play the stereo too loud.

And he can't

spend a lot of time handholding naive ma and pa landlords who open up their owner-occupied two-family without much forethought and then are shocked by the 3 am phone calls that come with the deal.

But before dismissing Ronnie Bourgeois as a man driven by money or greed, or one who exploits low-income clients, take a deep breath and listen. Amid his high-speed patter, his pride emerges as another side to that initial one-dimensional impression.

And know that if he vanished from his end of the marketplace, the dwellings he represents would not, but his high-energy ability to get people into them would.

With over 1000 leases representing 40 percent of his business at Bass River Properties on Route 28 in West Dennis, 275 of them have their rent augmented by Section 8 government subsidy.

"I'm pretty proud of that," the hustling broker says, adding, "black, white, yellow, green," they all "deserve decent housing. I've never had a discrimination issue."

♦♦♦

"Good tenants" are one of Cape Cod's endangered species, Ronnie says. At the same time, "the landlord wants a squeaky clean tenant that doesn't exist."

As good renters depart the market to buy their own homes, and



as landlords looking disillusioned with real-world tenants who may not be squeaky clean, a wise closes on the guy in the middle.

"I try to get myself out of the middle," Bourgeois says, referring specifically to maintenance issues, but also lamenting his unenviable role as target of everyone's pointed fingers when things go wrong.

Section 8 housing is supposed to be "invisible," meaning the government program does not go out and recruit landlords to participate or otherwise label or identify its clients.

But to make a living in Ronnie's shoes takes a lot of recruiting, regardless of whether the tenant is on Section 8 or, as a majority of his are, making a little too much to qualify.

When a landlord says, "No Section 8, I try not to listen to that," he says.

"I chase off-Cape owners," he explains, reading the classified ads and grabbing the phone. He also uses direct mail and publishes a newsletter for landlords called *Perspective*, a recent issue of which has articles headlined, "Make your broker accountable," and "Maintenance Tips."

A front-page article, "Why did you become a landlord?" by Ronnie's partner Russell Dieter, contains the following advice: "The important thing to remember is that the property is an investment and a business. You should not get personally attached to either the property or the occupant."

If that sounds cold, it's just another example of two ways of looking at the niche Ronnie has staked out. Get involved emotionally, his worldview suggests, and the ironic result will be fewer people getting a roof over their heads when they need it most.

◆◆◆

If good tenants want good places to live, they have to measure up. Ronnie rapidly recites his mantra several times during an interview: "Three main criteria: a good job reference, OK credit, good rental references. A landlord wants people who are clean, pay on time, don't bother the neighbors."

For him, the screening process begins before a prospective tenant comes through the door of his office. In fact, they don't just walk through the door. He requires every renter to make an appointment.

A few basic questions about what you can afford and how many bedrooms you need lead to the next step. Unlike a Realtor who drives buyers around affluent neighborhoods to view their potential Cape dream house, Ronnie does it this way: "I meet you there.

"They don't get in my car," he says. "I don't waste time with people that aren't qualified. I give them the time at the property."

That means people with bad credit, a trail of broken leases or disputes with past landlords, not enough income and no Section 8 voucher, do not get chauffeured on a tour of apartments.

A qualified applicant gets more of Ronnie's time, however. Once they are over that bar, he becomes something of an advocate for them, though he never loses sight of the fact that he works for the landlord, also offering eviction and management services.

He takes in 40 applications a month, on average, and walks tenants through the process. About eight deals get consummated, three of which he says are likely to be Section 8. He offers advice if it will help a good tenant get in, such as, "Don't say to the landlord, 'I need to move this weekend.'"

Ronnie, as you might expect, takes a no-nonsense approach to screening applicants. He guarantees tenants won't depart for six months, offering if that happens to find new ones for free.

The first thing Ronnie does is get permission to pull a credit report. Beyond the obvious fiscal picture it provides, it also lists past addresses. If the applicant has failed to disclose one of them, a red flag pops up.

The missing address may be "where he had a problem with Mrs. Jones," (the landlord), or the most recent address may show signs, if you were to drive by, of neglect or abuse — "three engine blocks in the yard and a bullet hole in the window," he jokes.

Another controversial technique is this question Ronnie asks on the application form: "Make of vacuum cleaner." He admits it may not be legal to require an answer, "but it tells if they own one," he says.

"The tenants I've rented to, they love me. The ones I've said no to, it's society's fault. [But] I'm not the only one who's turned them down."

◆◆◆

Ronnie Bourgeois bought his first investment property, a two-family in the New Bedford - Fall River area, when he was renting there at 21 years old. "The landlord was making \$1000 a month from us," and Ronnie heard he had purchased it for \$42,000. "The light bulb clicked."

He ended up owning five buildings by the time he was 27, and says, "I got over my head."

He moved to the Cape and started Bass River Properties in 1994. In addition, he owns 15 apartments in Hyannis and says nine of them are presently subsidized by Section 8.

Section 8 is a program he believes in, but he's critical of several aspects. The first is inspections. Calling them "pretty tough," he says they are also very subjective, used to rate the property and determine how much it's worth in rent.

Noting that Housing Assistance Corp. handles most of his Section 8s, he says their inspectors have never given him an "A" grade. Wouldn't you think one of the units over the years would rate an A, he asks, even though he also admits to representing some dumps.

"That's frustrating." He claims one time they refused to perform an inspection, saying the unit was not yet vacated because there were "a few boxes" left behind.

The big problem with that is Ronnie sees such units "scooped" by market rate tenants who show up with a check for first, last and security while the bureaucracy churns it wheels.

"That's what I don't like about the system. But to be fair, they can't rent out unsafe places."

And the program just doesn't pay what the apartment is worth, he adds.

So why bother with Section 8?

First and foremost, "it's stable income," Ronnie says. The checks come on time. Also, "Section 8 tenants last longer," he says, compared to upwardly mobile professionals who move often.

"I have a woman paying \$1350. If she moves it'll be \$2500 to renovate and I'll get \$1250 next time."

And one thing's for sure: Ronnie Bourgeois can do the math.

"That's five grand. I don't want her to move." ▼

