

CASE 6

Julia lives in a modest working class residential neighborhood of single-family homes, where she raised her three children and enjoys visits from her grandchildren. Signs of wear gradually crept into the neighborhood since Julia and her husband moved in with their young family thirty years ago. She is grateful that taxes have stayed low, allowing her to remain in her home, but has watched with some concern the consequences of defeated ballot measures: lack of street repairs; delayed maintenance on public buildings; and a poor rating for the local school due to downsized curriculum, elimination of extracurricular activities, and classroom overcrowding. Today, another issue of overcrowding is on her mind as Julia and three of her neighbors are discussing over coffee one of the houses on their street.

“There are at least eighteen that I know have been living there for the past seven months”, stated Diane. “That house has the same floor plan as mine, and I was in it often before Kristen and her family moved away. There are only three small bedrooms, and a partial basement. There’s an attic, but it’s not tall enough to stand in, and it’s reached by a trap door in the ceiling. I can’t imagine how all those people can live there!”

“Diane, how do you know there are eighteen?” asked Ann.

“At least eighteen. There were so many it made me curious enough to actually keep track. There are three men, six women, and at least nine kids for certain. I don’t think it should be allowed!”

“Why not?” asked Julia. “They seem like nice, hard-working people who are just trying to make a living”.

“The house needs paint, the roof looks bad, and the screens are torn. It’s probably a mess inside, if the outside is any indication. There are all these junky cars parked in the street, and by garbage day the cans are overflowing. I don’t think illegal aliens should be allowed here at all, let alone so many crowded into one tiny house,” Karen responded heatedly.

Ann asked, “Do you know for sure they’re here illegally? Are you assuming that because they struggle with English that they are not legal residents? They might just as easily be family or friends who are having trouble making ends meet and need to live together to have a roof over their children’s heads. Don’t you remember when Danny and his family stayed with me, and Tim and his family stayed with our other brother? When the mill closed in my hometown, both my brothers lost their jobs. As people moved away, housing prices crashed. They couldn’t stay because there was no work, they couldn’t sell their homes, and they had no money to leave. Affordable housing is such a problem. It was nearly impossible for my brothers either to rent or buy anything. So many communities have housing restrictions, and builders prefer to cater to the wealthy market rather than build affordable housing. That’s understandable as they’re in business, but we don’t have social programs to address the housing need. A newspaper article I

read said that many people pay over half their income for mortgages and that people on minimum wage have trouble renting even a two-bedroom apartment. It also said that it is impossible for someone working full-time making the increased minimum wage to rent a small two-bedroom apartment anywhere in the country. And I'm hearing about more and more people who are losing their homes in foreclosures. ”

“What really worries me is safety,” said Diane. “Kristen always complained that the furnace wasn’t very good, and they had to use space heaters sometimes. As they added hairdryers and audio equipment and other electronics, the fuses blew regularly. She was always worried about fire.”

“I think we should report our concerns to the city, or start a petition,” said Karen. “People in the neighborhood are getting upset with how overcrowded and run-down the place is. And all these kids that are overwhelming the school!”

“I disagree!” said Ann firmly. “I don’t care if they are here legally or not, and I don’t understand why that matters to you. I agree with Julie that they seem to be good people trying to make a living and make a better life for their children. I know how hard you worked to give your kids a future, and what a difference it made to my brothers that Michael and I could help them. Can you imagine how traumatic it would be for our neighbors to be targeted or investigated, especially with limited language proficiency and worrying about the children?”

Julia didn’t know what she thought. Families should help each other. She was very worried about the safety of all those people in that tiny house, especially with a cold winter approaching. If they reported their concerns, the families could be investigated and forced into an even more hazardous situation. On the other hand, if there were a fire and anyone was hurt, she would never forgive herself. If they did report their concerns, would the consequences be safety or harassment?