

Renting

The smart landlord goes the extra mile



David Hayes
The Life-long Renter

It's overcast and intermittently raining on the evening of the 88 Erskine Ave. barbecue, but it hasn't dampened anyone's spirits. At shortly after 6 p.m. people are trickling in from work and gathering under the gracefully arching concrete portico at the building's entrance where a DJ is spinning hot tracks and a catering company is serving up beef brisket sandwiches, banquet burgers, long hot dogs and salads.

Look, there's Betty Ann Anderson, the irrepressibly gregarious leasing agent and 88 Erskine's "den mother," talking to the new couple from the eighth floor. There's a contractor often employed by the building's owner, Greenwin Property Management Inc., chatting to Peter Welsh, the superintendent. And isn't that beautiful, silver-haired lady none other than Helen Fox, who has lived

here for three decades — since the building opened? And she's sitting with her friend, Barbara Smith, a relative newcomer who arrived in 1980. And here comes a Toronto city councillor who's a tenant in the building but understandably prefers to keep a low profile. (Alas, even in Toronto-the-Good there are wackos who might harass public figures.)

Greenwin's 88 Erskine, near Yonge St. and Eglinton Ave. E., is a flagship, at the leading edge of a trend that's gaining acceptance in Toronto. There was a time when vacancy rates were at, or near, zero and renters were at the mercy of landlords. Although there remains an affordable housing crisis, the vacancy rate now hovers just below 4 per cent, making it a renter's market. When interest rates started dropping in 2000, it created a condo boom. But many treat their condos as investment properties and put them out as rentals.

One reason some landlords have begun improving their buildings and adding features is that condos, primarily aimed at the homebuying market, tend to be newer and come with deluxe amenities. Also, in a competitive market, improving the quality of

life in a rental building is preferred over offering lower rents. It's smarter to provide everyone with more services than stir up resentment among existing tenants by offering cut-rate rents to new ones.

At 88 Erskine, a 500-unit building, there is a media room with a wall of books and magazines, large-screen TV and wireless Internet, a fully-equipped gym and a rooftop lap pool. A convenience store, with dry

Maintenance and repairs are guaranteed at 88 Erskine within 48 hours

cleaning service and high-quality coffee is next to the 24-hour laundry with a cafe-like lounge that's also Wi-Fi-ready. Greenwin sponsors aqua-fitness, aerobics, yoga, Pilates, after-school movies and watercolour painting, as well as a book club. In addition to the annual summer barbecue and fall corn roast, it periodically serves coffee and pastries in the lobby for tenants rushing off to work. Maintenance and repairs are guaranteed within 48 hours, with a rent credit for each day the problem remains unsolved.

Shirley Romanada, who has just helped herself to an ice cream cup, moved from her home after her husband died and two children moved out. She loves her southwest view from the 27th floor, taking yoga classes and a feeling of neighbourliness that she says is unusual for highrises. What with the building's 50-camera security system and concierge to help her in with heavy bags, this widow says: "I feel absolutely safe. Living here has aspects of a condo and of a hotel."

David Hulchanski, director of the University of Toronto's Centre for Urban and Community Studies, has observed the phenomenon. "It's not only what's inside your apartment that counts, but what's outside it as well," he says. "Especially when vacancy rates are low and you have a choice. Many apartment buildings are emulating condos, but smart tenants know that unlike condos, where the owner may sell or decide to move in at any time, so long as you pay your rent you have security of tenure in apartments."

At the barbecue, 88 Erskine's staff is circulating amongst the throng. "You can't decide to be

sociable just to get people in your building," says Kevin Green, Greenwin's executive vice-president. "It's all about sincerely believing in it yourself and hiring people who believe it, too. No one would be fooled if I was forcing a superintendent to handle an event like this and the person was miserable and looking at his watch like he couldn't wait to lock the door."

Yes, it's a touchy-feely event, great PR for Greenwin, but when it's mentioned that hiring the right staff is important, CEO Mike Bolahood provides a small reality check with the corporate world. "Well, if things weren't running well, they wouldn't be sitting around here having a good time."

Simon Gray, a 33-year-old sales manager with Procom Consultants Group, a large IT firm, has lived happily for several years in a one-bedroom, able to walk to work. When he met his girlfriend, they decided to move into a 1,600-square-foot penthouse suite with central air and a wraparound balcony providing a spectacular view north and east. A condo penthouse would be about half the size and twice the rent.

"Last fall I attended a goodbye party for the tuck shop owner,

Nick, who was retiring after 17 years," says Gray. "His entire family, many of whom worked in the store, came to say farewell. I remember the owner of the building making a lovely speech and the entire lobby filled with residents waiting to be photographed with Nick. That's the sense of community I'm talking about."

"People say we're crazy to rent but I don't agree. We'll buy a house, but we don't have to rush. We'll buy when we're ready to buy and in the meantime we have a great lifestyle here."

It's not hard to hear testimonials like this if you talk to the residents of 88 Erskine. But is there a measurable payoff for Greenwin? "It's intangible," says Ivan Murgic, the company's vice-president, rental operations, as he surveys the tenants crowding around the food tables. "I'd have trouble proving it for you on a piece of paper. But for a landlord, how can it be bad to create a neighbourhood of happy people within a building?"

David Hayes is an author and award-winning feature writer who has been a renter most of his life. If you have stories or information to share about renting, reach him at lifelong_renter@sympatico.ca.