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Cats confound neighbors

 BY LORI KURTZMAN | LKURTZMAN@ENQUIRER.COM
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EAST END - Few people seemed to know what festered behind the front door of the two-story yellow house at 251 Strader Ave.

Neighbors sure didn't. It wasn't until the bank foreclosed and the man living there left that they got a look - and caught a nauseating whiff - of what was inside.

Cats.

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Sick, hungry, dying cats.

At least 60 of them.

They'd crowded into the corners and onto the rafters of the 112-year-old home and turned it into a 1,500-square-foot litter box. The stench was overwhelming. A real estate agent put one foot in the house and promptly refused to enter.

Michael Bolan bought 251 Strader last month for \$18,000, sight unseen.

Then, he saw it.

"I basically thought, well, I'll have to tear it down," Bolan said.

Every city has a house like this one. Some have several.

The public hears about them when they make the news, when TV stations broadcast pictures of sick animals and urine-soaked floors and piles of junk crowding what might have been, at some point, a tidy home.

How, one wonders, did it get this way? How could neighbors have no clue? What happens once they're discovered?

Witness 251 Strader.

"I knew he had cats," said Joe Corcoran, who lives across the street. "I didn't know he had that many."

The previous owner, according to the Hamilton County Auditor's Office, was William G. Speth.

Neighbors, even the kids, called him Bill. He bought the place in the fall of 1996 for \$38,500 and was a well-liked if peculiar fixture of Strader Avenue.

Those who know him don't have a bad word to say about him. They said Speth loved building things, inventing things, fixing things.

He had a pet opossum and a pigeon he trained to deliver a message to 15-year-old Troy Brewer across the street.

"A real big animal lover," Troy called him.

He'd often give 12-year-old Donovan Hibbard a few bucks to buy junk food at the Speedway.

He's a heck of a pool player and one of the best people longtime friend Richard Arnett knows.

"He's a good person," Arnett said. "He'd give you the shirt off his back."

Neighbors sometimes saw cats peering through the windows or slinking across Speth's lawn. They thought the animals belonged to his mother, who once lived there. The idea the house might be crawling with them never crossed their minds.

Then again, rarely did anyone go into Speth's house. He spent most of his time outdoors. It's been said that even in the winter, he kept visitors on the porch, bundled up, chatting in the cold.

Was he trying to hide the mess inside? Was he embarrassed, ashamed, unaware? In the end, it didn't matter.

Speth's secret got out.

Last spring, foreclosure hanging over him, Speth slipped away from 251 Strader, and people were finally able to see what he had been hiding for years.

The spectacle horrified animal lovers like Gail Silver, who happened upon the house during a bike ride. Silver's worked fervently to try to find homes for the 60-plus "foreclosure cats."



THE ENQUIRER/CARRIE COCHRAN

Paul Mills, left, helps Michael Bolan remove the porch roof on Strader in the East End Thursday, September 6, 2007 at what they call the -cat house,-which Bolan bought on a foreclosure. He has been working to clean the up from the 60 dead and dying cats that were in the house from the previous owner.

Rescue a cat

To learn more about the cats rescued from 251 Strader Ave., visit www.foreclosurecats.org

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Speth's neighbors, however, seem less shocked. There's some surprise, but there's also this, from Corcoran: a shrug. "This is the 'hood," he said. He pointed to one home on the block and said it's a crack house. He pointed to another and said it used to be.

But there are spots of beauty on the street, too: quaint, well-manicured homes and a gorgeous community garden - which Corcoran tends - bursting with sunflowers and strawberries and peaches. The garden, in fact, lies just steps from Speth's old house.

Bolan didn't tear it down after all.

Once the cats were rescued and removed, he went in with some help and a commercial-strength gas mask and scraped inches of filth from the floors. When the upstairs ceiling was pried away, piles of feces rained down.

Underneath it all, Bolan unearthed a place he thinks he can salvage. For weeks, he's treated the stench with a locally sold product called OdorXit, and he said it's working.

While the smell of cat urine remains strong on the first floor, it's nearly gone on the second.

Bolan no longer needs the gas mask. He thinks it'll take about two months to clear it all out.

Then, the cat house will become history, just a story people on the block tell each other with the same nonchalance they use to point out a suspected crack house.

It might be remembered differently by someone else, though - the person who knows how this all happened.

Speth's still around, neighbors say, though no one knows exactly where he lives.

They still see him every once in a while, driving by, checking out the place he once called home.

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