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Willowbrook resident's living nightmare

By SABRINA ROCCO

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Roxanne Miller holds one of her protest signs in her Willowbrook home. Her KB Home is being remediated for mold and water damage, but she says she cannot stay in the dwelling more than a half hour or she becomes nauseous and ill. TIFFANY TOMPKINS-CONDIE/Bradenton Herald TTOMPKINS@BRADENTON.COM [Buy Photo](#)

EAST MANATEE -- After the 18-hour drive from Wheeling, Ill., Roxanne Miller pulled into the brand new driveway of her brand new townhouse to start her brand new life.

But a KB Home salesman had left her the wrong key.

She spent the rest of that night in the driver's seat of her Toyota Corolla, on the phone with a friend, until a locksmith showed up at 4 a.m.

"That was the start of hell," Miller said late last month, taking a drag from a Virginia Slim cigarette, her life's belongings still packed in boxes around her.

Since her move in 2009, Miller has been battling KB Home, the condominium developer, after her unit and 271 others in the Willowbrook community were discovered to have water intrusion, mold and defective balconies, among other construction problems.

But her nightmare didn't stop with the flawed construction.

She said she was hospitalized numerous times because of the mold that she had breathed in her condo. A ligament in her foot was torn when a door in her garage broke and came crashing down on it, Miller added. A third-party contractor, sent out by KB Home to repair windows, died in her driveway from a heart attack prompted by cocaine abuse. She said she damaged her bladder lift trying to revive him.

Between legal fees, medical bills for hospital visits and doctors' appointments, as well as other expenses associated with her townhouse, Miller, 58, said she has spent more than \$200,000.

She had quit her job working as a community advocate and researcher for the Women's Health Resource Center in Park Ridge, Ill., a few days before moving to her new home in Florida. She had planned to unpack for a week, then set out to find a new job.

But as the reconstruction process began to unravel, she feared leaving her home, what with workers and inspectors coming and going all day. She said she had trusted them once, only to discover that her laptop, some movies and tools had been stolen.

Miller said she now lives on disability payments and food stamps.

"I have lost everything," she said, tears pooling at the rims of her tired eyes. "I've lost my dream."

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It's a simmering Florida afternoon about 1 p.m., and hard-hatted workers are shimmying up and down scaffolding that blankets Miller's building at 8977 White Sage Loop. The neighborhood is awash in Dumpsters, construction trucks and buoyant banter between Spanish-speaking workers.

Miller turns the curve, maneuvering around the madness in her apple-red Prius. It's difficult to miss her, especially with the giant "KB HOME SUCKS" sticker plastered across the back window.

A pickup truck blocks her driveway. Miller rolls down her window, applies one bare foot to the brakes and blasts her horn for a solid 10 seconds.

"This is only a slice of what we go through," she yells through the opposite window.

Since reconstruction began in January 2013, eight buildings have received certificates of completion, 16 buildings are ready for final inspection and the remaining two buildings have just been prepared for repairs, says John Barnott, director of building and development for Manatee County. KB Home agreed to pay for repairs and hired Gibsonton-based Dueall Construction to complete the work.

"We have had great progress in Willowbrook, and we have many homeowners who are satisfied with the finished product and community upgrade," says KB Home spokeswoman Cara Kane in an email. "We are currently starting our last two buildings and anticipate all of the work will be complete by the end of the year or early next year."

But Miller says she thinks the mold remediation isn't being done properly. She says she sees good wood being installed over rotted wood and the air conditioning units, she contends, aren't the correct tonnage.

Barnott says he is confident that construction is being conducted properly and that county building official CJ Dupre is at the site three to four times each week to check on construction and to communicate with residents.

Three engineering firms are overseeing construction: Karins Engineering, which represents the homeowners; Structural Engineering Inc., which represents KB Home; and Delta Engineering, which helps the two firms come to agreements.

"In my personal opinion, all three are excellent engineering firms," Barnott says, adding that his staff collects and reviews the results of the firms' inspections.

When all of the repairs are completed, the county will not reinspect the units, he says.

Another Willowbrook resident, Patrick McGettigan, has been living in a Marriot hotel on University Parkway with his two dogs for the past 113 days while repairs are made to the exterior of his home. In two weeks, workers will begin on the interior.

McGettigan, 57, says he used to travel to and from Philadelphia to run the family business, but has since passed his duties to his son in order to supervise work on his condo.

"You have to watch what they're doing," McGettigan says. "You can't leave them alone doing this project because you'll get totally ripped off."

McGettigan says workers stole packages of floor tiles and tried to take his kitchen cabinets. Now, McGettigan says he is constantly on stand-by so when workers need to get inside his unit, he can drive over to supervise.

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Manatee County Commissioner Robin DiSabatino said she is upset with the way county staff has handled the Willowbrook crisis, beginning with the building department's inspection of the condo buildings when they were first constructed in 2005.

All buildings passed a final inspection and certificates of occupancy were issued, records show.

"I'm just very disappointed that this has happened. I'm very appalled that this has gone on and has had to escalate to this point," DiSabatino said. "It really disturbs me that they (the residents) are continuing to be taken through the wringer, so to speak, and not have complete satisfaction."

The commissioner said working with county staff on this issue and others has been a challenge as commissioners are often told not to get involved on "staff decisions."

"I can send emails, I can make phone calls, I can request meetings, but I'm here to tell you nine times out of 10, I will not get a call back, I will not get an email back, I will not get a meeting from administration, starting from the top," she said. "If the county administrator doesn't send a message to the department head to fix something, it's not getting done."

"It's totally insane how this administration is working at the moment," she added.

The Florida Office of the Attorney General is conducting its own investigation into KB Home, but is prohibited from releasing details at this time, said attorney general spokesman Whitney Ray.

In a letter dated April 12, 2013, the attorney general's office sent a letter to a KB Home attorney Edward Page, requesting documents pertaining to the Willowbrook community including complaint files and warranty claims, documents relating to analysis of water intrusion and other construction-related issues and engineering reports, among other files.

"The Florida Attorney General's Office is making a preliminary inquiry into the status of the KB Home situation as it involves Willowbrook and other communities KB Home has developed in Florida," the letter said.

Letters from owners and residents sent to the attorney general's office over the years bleed desperation:

"Now we are stuck in a position as a young family owning our first home and we have nowhere to turn," Ashley Delph wrote.

"We are financially and emotionally drained," Philip Graziano wrote.

Commissioner Vanessa Baugh, whose district encompasses Willowbrook, said she trusts the county building department is doing its job.

"I feel confident that our building department will be watching over this with a fine-tooth comb to make sure that everything is being done to code," Baugh said of the current reconstruction.

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"Pump the chest hard and fast, 30 times," the 911 dispatcher instructed.

This was just after Ronald Wiggins, a third-party contractor sent by KB Home to Miller's unit to repair her windows, collapsed on her lawn.

"One, two ..." Miller said.

"At least twice per second ..."

"Three, four, five, six ..."

"Let the chest come all the way up in between pumps, OK?"

"His chest is like freezing up." Miller screamed, "Breathe! Keep breathing!"

"Just keep doing it, OK?"

But from what Miller said she could tell, the man already was dead.

On Feb. 10, 2010, Wiggins died of a heart attack brought on by chronic cocaine abuse, according to an autopsy report.

The dispatcher had instructed her to give him cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Blood and other fluids oozed from his throat into Miller's mouth as she attempted mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. She said she broke her bladder lift -- a surgically implanted reinforcement designed to keep organs in place -- from vomiting so forcefully. And after the ambulance had removed Wiggins, she said all she could think about was if she had contracted a disease, such as HIV.

Tests later revealed she was not infected.

But it wasn't much longer until the door fell on her foot, causing a tear of her anterior talofibular ligament, medical records show. To this day, Miller said she still experiences pain in her foot and walking is hard.

When it became too difficult to breathe easily in her unit because of the mold, Miller said she bought the best-rated cot from REI.com, an online camping-supply store, and slept outside on her balcony.

But a worker soon told her the balcony was too dangerous for her to sleep on. She pulled the mattress from her bed and situated it near the balcony's sliding glass door. She said she slept with the door open and her head protruding onto the balcony to keep from breathing the mold spores.

In March, KB Home relocated her to the Colonial Grande apartments in Lakewood Ranch, where she said she's now able to get a good night's sleep.

The apartment is nice, Miller said, but not enough to ease her sorrow.

"I can't tell you the amount of crying I've done. How can a large corporation get away with this?" Miller said. "There's no end. There's literally no end. Every day is a battle."

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