

CALLING THEIR BLUFF

She was a very determined person, and she knew what they were doing was wrong. And she was willing to say so. A lot of people give in under that kind of pressure."

DANA BERLINER, attorney for Institute for Justice

# Tenacity was A.C. homeowner's Trump card

## Foiled pressure to sell property in sea of casinos

By JACK KNARR  
Special to the Daily News

ANYONE WHO stumbled upon widow Vera Coking's old boarding house at 127 S. Columbia in Atlantic City during the 1980s and '90s knew that something very bizarre was happening there.

And if you saw the place at night, with no lights on, it looked all the more macabre.

You see, Vera Coking refused to sell her home to casino developer Bob Guccione, who publishes *Penthouse* magazine. He had bought up all the other properties in the block except a little Italian restaurant and a money-for-gold shop whose owners also refused to sell.

But they were out of the way, down at the Pacific Avenue end of South Columbia. Coking's place was smack in the middle of the block.

So, do you know what Guccione did?

He began building the casino around Coking's house. A huge skeleton of steel girders was welded right up to both sides of her three-story boarding house, then actually built up each side and the back. And then girders were welded up over the top of her house.

It looked as if some play monster had reduced Coking's place to a mouse-house locked into the base of a giant wall. Guccione would show her. She didn't want to sell? Fine! The old woman could stay there forever, if she wanted — and suffer.

But the "mouse" was undaunted. Coking went looking for a lawyer who wasn't tainted by New Jersey or Atlantic City connections. She and her lawyer, Glenn A. Zeitz, quietly fought back for more than five years.

They were later joined by the In-



Vera Coking in 1998 photo gives victory sign after judge's ruling allowed her to keep her home.

stitute for Justice, a law center in Washington, D.C., that advocates property rights.

And now, decades later, she has outlasted all those who wanted her gone — Bob Guccione, and the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, and finally, even Donald Trump himself.

Today, she's still at 127 S. Columbia, and they're not — proof that even a lonely old woman can fend off the rich guys. And the courageous lady did something far greater for other beleaguered property owners caught in similar condemnation proceedings around the country: She showed them how to fight back and win.

According to the Institute for Justice, Coking's landmark victory in 1998 was the first step in what has become a nationwide movement against the abuse of eminent domain by government officials for the benefit of private parties.

Property owners everywhere are following her example, according to the institute's attorney, Dana Berliner.

For example, in Pittsburgh, the mayor's plans to condemn 64 buildings housing 125 downtown businesses and transfer the plot to a Chicago developer was foiled by activists. And in Maryland, the legislature tried to do a similar deal, but citizens fought back, leading a stunning 70-30 percent victory in a referendum.

And in New Rochelle, N.Y., protesters derailed the mayor's plan to condemn dozens of businesses and homes to make way for a big Ikea store.

And it all began with Coking's old boarding house, sitting in the way of casino expansion in Atlantic City.

"It was her dream house that she purchased years ago, she and her husband," said Berliner. "She'd lived there a very long time. And she did not want to move. She was a very determined person, and she knew what they

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