

## **“Scientists have to be Fearless About Telling the Truth”**

By John Hans Gilderbloom, formerly of the University of Louisville, Urban and Public Affairs, and currently with the independent Center for Sustainable Urban Development

Professors need to be fearless in telling the truth. That is what my father told me when I received physical threats and people tried to assassinate my character. He told me, “I have heard their threats against you, and I raised you to have a spine and always be truthful so you can live with yourself. I don’t want a jellyfish. That’s why I volunteered to fight the fascists in World War II.” He told me I had his full support, but he was also afraid of losing me, his only son.

I am a public intellectual, paid by the taxpayers in Kentucky who want truth over nonsense.

After receiving that encouragement from my father, something unexpected happened: I convinced the Governor of California to veto anti-renter rights legislation. Facts matter, and the veto trumped the million-dollar real estate lobby disinformation campaign. I not only survived a gunshot to my head but learned to thrive. So please don’t shoot the professor. I have been receiving threats since 1980 and when I wrote peer reviewed books and articles advocating for regulations of rents, evictions, improved access of the disabled, and, most importantly, environmental regulations that protect us from climate chaos. You might be surprised that it is not the academic left cheering me on but conservative, pro-free speech professors and FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education). The ACLU passed on representing me because they are more focused on getting biological males to play in girls sports, at least here in Louisville.

I received repeated warnings from people in a powerful real estate lobby about the research I was conducting on tenants' rights. They made phone calls to my father, and visited my professors telling them that I (John Hans Gilderbloom) needed to cease and desist.

Someone knocked on the door of my studio apartment late one night, and I foolishly opened it. A man forced his way in, and within 30 seconds I was told to get on my hands and knees. I did not say a word. It was a surreal moment, and I was speechless. The intruder said only six words, "We are tired of your bullshit." Then he shot me, and I crumpled to the floor and played dead. He left quickly, taking nothing. I was lucky, sort of. I was shot with a blank, not a bullet, but it still could have killed me. I might have saved my life by moving just a fraction of an inch. It is not uncommon to have a blank cause death much like Brandon Lee, son of Bruce Lee, who died on set when shot by a blank. Its also a popular way of professional killers to kill since no bullet can be found. According to police, there was no evidence, and there were no witnesses. I was lucky to avoid serious injury, save a constant ringing in my ear, lost eyesight, and PTSD.

Why did this happen? Because I was a fearless advocate of rent control. I influenced Governor Jerry Brown to veto a bill that would ban cities from enacting rent and eviction controls in California, and I later produced a book, *Rent Control: A Source Book*, which was called the Bible of the modern rent control movement. Today, my fingerprints are all over the rent control laws being passed that protect tenants from unscrupulous landlords.

I not only survived, but I thrived. The threats to back down and big money bribes did not dissuade me. It had a powerful impact that I might not have long to live, so I better make the most of it while on earth. I was on fire and felt I had nothing to lose.

I was able to block federal legislation by then President Ronald Reagan that would have banned local rent control. The research I conducted with my colleague Richard Appelbaum influenced President Reagan to back down with his proposals to deny block grants to cities with fair rent and eviction controls.

I took a job at the University of Houston, where a Republican councilwoman asked for a city-funded study of the housing needs of people with disabilities and the elderly. We looked at 1,918 elderly and disabled people. The hard data from this study became the basis for passing the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) under President George H.W. Bush. The study showed the need for reserved parking, safe bathrooms, ramps, rails, and other accommodations for these populations. It was a liberating act for the disabled, and it also meant more customers in airplanes, grocery stores, restaurants, and sports arenas, which became a win-win. Oddly, the left was mostly silent about the passage of the ADA. I received a congressional medal of thanks from the Republican caucus. Since my godfather (and later in life, my father) were both wheelchair users, I was really proud of this award.

I was also awarded several grants worth \$3.5 million dollars to explore how universities can improve poor neighborhoods with better housing, health, education, safety, and civility.

In my seminar, we studied both right and left wing perspectives on ghettos, and several of my students complained that such theories without data were not honest, data-driven explanations. We asked the poor what they wanted.

The second time the police uncovered a plot to have me assassinated was in the Fall of 2011. Someone who had heard about the plot contacted the Louisville Police, the University Police, and the President of the University of Louisville. They said a man was waiting outside

my home with an automatic weapon. They said I had upset some very powerful people who didn't want to be held accountable for pollution in West Louisville, where thousands prematurely die by about 12 years on average. The plot was foiled with the help of police regularly parking in front of my home and UofL of police stationed near the classroom where I taught.

This did not stop the unprecedented smear campaign against me. In a meeting with the then Vice President of Research, he told me I was a Marxist Bolshevik with way too much power both locally and at the federal level. I told the Vice President that I am probably the biggest critic of Marxism and how it has failed so badly in Cuba—I was no real friend of the radical left that dominated liberalism. I spent two years in Cuba and also visited Venezuela and Russia. I was arrested in Cuba for taking counter revolutionary photos of starving children. Cuba was no socialist paradise.

The Vice President told me that the Kentucky Institute for the Environment and Sustainable Development and Center for Sustainable Urban Neighborhoods would be shut down at the behest of a multimillion-dollar donor. The closures would include shredding research reports and hundreds of copies of Sustain Journal. Reports posted by faculty and students were erased. A new institute took the place of the closed centers. It was dedicated to favoring coal, chemical, tobacco, and liquor interests and made claims that the air, water, and soil was getting better and that planting more trees, was the key to a healthy environment. The Center was odd because it was silent or even dismissive about the air being dangerous. I offered to work at the misnamed Envirome Institute Center for Healthy Air, Water and Soil; a more appropriate name for it would be the Center for Climate Denialism.

In another instance, a super wealthy uber rich from the trucking and farming industry stormed into President Ramsey's and accused me of scientific misconduct. It got so heated that the police

escorted him out of the President's office. President Ramsey agreed to hire, without my knowledge, a Harvard academic team to review my books and peer reviewed research. They raved about the highest scientific standards in my research. After the review, I was asked to attend the President's millionaire box to meet with UofL Board of Trustees members.

The third attempt on my life was more recent and involved a man with a police record of several who claimed on social media that he was an international assassin and bragged that he slept with automatic weapons. He said if I didn't pay him \$60,000, he would try to get me fired by the University of Louisville. He was so stupid, he sent his threats in emails and texts to me and others. He was later arrested for attempted extortion of over \$10,000.

The theme song that best describes my life is "I Won't Back Down" by Tom Petty. I will continue to stand up to the powerful and fight for clean air, water, and soil in Louisville.