

The Portland Mercury

A Heartfelt Letter Convinced One Family to Sell Their Home. How It's An Airbnb.

Welcome to the Future!

When Kurt Morris and his wife, Carol, put their four-bedroom Sellwood-Moreland home on the market last spring, they were immediately struck by one early offer—from a family that Morris says reminded him of his own.

“They had crafted a very nice offer letter, explaining how much they loved our home and how they could see themselves enjoying all that our neighborhood could offer,” Morris says. “They even included a picture of their school-age daughter who looked very much like our own. We were pleased that the new homeowners would carry on in a place we had made a home for many years.”

So the Morris family bit, selling their beloved home to a couple named Ryan and Kristina Brown. The Browns said they were eager to move in and allow their daughter, Milli, to play in the house's “magical” basement and “exceptional” backyard.

Then a funny thing happened: They never showed up.

After Morris accepted the \$550,000 offer, he says he drove by the home about once a week after his family moved out in July, always expecting changes the new owners would bring to the property. Instead, it didn't look like anyone ever moved in.

“The old neighbors reported people periodically picking up mail, but rarely any cars in front or apparent activity around or inside our old house,” Morris says. “Something told me that our buyers weren't necessarily the sweet family anxious to settle into their new home.”

He was right—the Browns didn't move into their new home. They live in California. Instead of providing Milli with a safe place to play, the entire house can be rented for \$150 a night on Airbnb.

Morris says he feels like the seemingly heartfelt letter duped him and his wife. And it's entirely possible other local homeowners are getting similar missives.

“De facto hotels are being plunked down in the middle of established neighborhoods by people with presumably little or no ties to the community who evidently feel compelled to lie about their intentions,” Morris says. “With no resident owners, neighbors become an ever-changing cast of people... all while contributing to our crippling housing shortage.”

The *Mercury* emailed Ryan Brown, asking if he would be willing to answer some questions about the Portland home. He initially responded, asking for more information, but went silent when asked to directly address Morris' accusations.

“Images from the Airbnb site show pretty clearly no one lives there on a permanent basis,” Morris says. “Every room [is] Ikea'd out, with no hints that it's any more than a hotel suite.”

No one answered the door any of the three times the *Mercury* dropped by the house, located in the 7400 block of SE 17th. There were lights on in the home at night, making

it possible to see that there are no personal effects that would indicate a family with a toddler lives there. The kitchen countertops are largely bare, and the coat hooks next to the front door are empty. The house does, as Morris says, resemble a sterile hotel space, not a young family's residence.

It's the opposite of what Morris was explicitly promised. In his letter before the sale, Brown describes his family's "ecstatic elation" at finding Morris' home. Brown wrote that he and his wife thought the home was "ideally suited for a family, especially one that expects frequent visits from grandparents and cousins and aunts and uncles."

He even noted that he and Kristina moved to Portland in 2010.

"I often have to travel to California, so it's important that when I'm gone, Kristina and Milli have a comfortable home in a safe neighborhood," Brown wrote. "We feel strongly that this is that home."

The Airbnb listing for the property advertises the full home for rental, and is managed by a local real estate agent named Sydney Mead. Mead initially told the *Mercury* that the Browns did, in fact, live at the Sellwood-Moreland home. After being pressed a little, though, she admitted the family lives in the San Francisco area, but said, "they feel like this is their primary home."

"They're a lovely couple whose original goal was to live in the home," Mead says. "But they ended up getting jobs in San Francisco and weren't able to move to Portland like they'd planned."

That means the Browns are flouting city law. When Portland City Council allowed Airbnb to start operating in Portland, the city set up rules for how the short-term rentals must be run. One biggie: The home must be the owner's primary residence.

Under the city's rules, owners are supposed to register as an Airbnb host, purchase a \$180 permit, and pay a "transient lodging tax." According to Jen Clodius, a senior management analyst for the city, the Browns aren't playing by any of those rules.

Earlier this month, Mead was listed as the host for four other Airbnbs, three of which the *Mercury* was able to locate. Clodius says none of them are permitted short-term rentals. No one answered the door at any of the three when the *Mercury* dropped by. As of Tuesday morning, Mead only appears to host three Airbnb locations, including Morris' former house.

Morris says he wants to know if this is becoming "a new thing" in Portland.

"How many more Airbnbs in the area are actually run for out-of-towners by local property managers in hot markets?" Morris asks. "In clear violation of both city law and the more general, 'Don't be a lying asshole?'"

In fact, the Browns' letter isn't the first to raise eyebrows in Portland. In Facebook groups about Portland's housing market, homeowners—some of whom aren't even looking to sell—report receiving notes from interested buyers. The letters are from young families or couples and are sometimes handwritten.

There's even a group dedicated to “assist[ing] homebuyers against all odds,” by writing handwritten notes to sellers. As an affiliated website puts it: In tight markets, “sometimes a love letter can seal the deal.”