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The NBA ‘SuperFan’ who got rich fighting rent control

James Goldstein has courtside seats and a Hall of Fame wing with his name on it. But his senior-citizen tenants say his business tactics are nothing to celebrate.

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LOS ANGELES — On a recent Thursday morning, James Goldstein sat down at his giant concrete slab of a desk, which offered a commanding view of the overcast city below, to knock out some business. He wore tennis gear and a red ball cap pulled over frizzy white hair.

His assistant, Roberta, had made neat stacks of emails, itineraries and invoices, printed in large type gentle on his 82-year-old eyes. The paperwork reflected the odd daily existence of a man who got famous by watching basketball — and rich in a way he doesn’t like to talk about.

There were NBA games to attend. Scouts for Yves Saint Laurent would be coming by his famed compound to plan future photo shoots. That evening, 900 partyers were set to descend on his in-home nightclub to promote “the awareness of the metaverse,” as Roberta described it.

And then there were his applications to hike the rent on the senior citizens who live in his empire of mobile home parks.

Goldstein has turned a peculiar source of fame into a carefully crafted legacy. For decades, including [throughout this NBA season and the playoffs](#), he has been a ubiquitous presence in courtside seats in arenas from coast to coast. Nobody but Goldstein, who has season tickets to both the Los Angeles Lakers and Clippers, is known to watch upward of 100 games per season from the best seats in the house.

He has become part of the NBA spectacle, instantly recognizable in his unique version of haute couture — the lizard-skin hat, the bandanna tied around his neck, the garish leather jacket — and accompanied by one of a rotating cast of fashion models five decades his junior. His devotion to the sport has earned him praise from top players and executives alike, with [former NBA commissioner David Stern](#) once lauding him as the “largest investor in NBA tickets in the world.”

Last summer, the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame unveiled the James F. Goldstein SuperFan Gallery, displaying some of his gaudiest jackets and other memorabilia. The honor came after he made a donation of an undisclosed amount.

Goldstein also lives in, and drives, future museum pieces. His home near Beverly Hills, built in 1963, was designed by famed architect John Lautner. Goldstein is constantly building around it, with his next big planned addition being an in-home theater; throughout his estate, walls and shelves are lined with framed photos of him with various celebrities. In 2016, Goldstein, who has never married and has no children, bequeathed the home and its contents to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, along with his 1961 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud.

The house and the basketball fandom represent his greatest traits, Goldstein said, after calling it a workday at 11 a.m. and strolling the grounds with a reporter. He is proud he has taken what he calls his “passions”— for basketball, fashion and architecture — and manifested them in a way that will remain after he’s gone. “It represents my patience and willingness to take an interest all the way,” Goldstein said.

But that same persistence shows up in his much quieter four-decade career as a landlord, in ways that appear at odds with the politics of the most liberal league in major American sports. An owner of mobile home parks throughout California, most of them seniors-only, Goldstein has been unrelenting in his quest to defeat limits on the amount of rent he can charge his tenants, according to court records and interviews with tenants and the city officials with whom he has done battle.

Goldstein has filed dozens of legal claims against California municipalities, seeking damages totaling in the hundreds of millions of dollars, for blocking his plans to increase rents by as much as double or more. In justifying the rent hikes, which continued throughout the pandemic, he often claims economic hardship as a landlord. Once, records show, after pioneering a method that effectively stripped rent control from one of his parks, then defeating a city’s efforts to stop him, he sued the city for having tried — as a warning to others.

Throughout it all, Goldstein has dismissed the objections of tenants who protested that, in gilding his own retirement, he’s ruining theirs.

Bill Wynder, an attorney who has represented Palm Springs and Carson in those cities’ decades-long battles against Goldstein, said the rent control laws Goldstein has attacked are vital to his tenants’ delicate living situations. “He didn’t particularly care, in my view, about the impact that would have on his largely fixed-income population,” Wynder said.

When asked whether Goldstein was the most problematic landlord faced by those cities during his tenure as their lawyer, Wynder responded: “Times one thousand.”

“He’s been a bully and a thorn in our side,” Carson Mayor Lula Davis-Holmes said. Of Goldstein being honored by the Basketball Hall of Fame and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the mayor said: “He’s buying his legacy. You’re robbing from the poor to pay the rich.”

In the past, Goldstein has brushed aside questions concerning his professional life, instead burnishing his image as the NBA’s mystery man while vaguely chalking up his wealth to “land investments in California.”

But when pressed on the issue this time, Goldstein said his properties, which he likes to call “manufactured housing communities,” are well-maintained, featuring amenities such as swimming pools and billiards tables. He described his aggressive tactics as necessary to stay afloat, given local policies suppressing rent increases.

“Even though I am a liberal, I don’t believe that rent control is fair,” Goldstein said. “It’s easy for someone not in the business to get a quick glance at my business and come to the conclusion that I’m just one of those greedy landlords.”

In fact, Goldstein suggested, it was the tenants who fought back who were the greedy ones.

“These aren’t just needy people who can’t afford to pay more,” he said. “These are all people, regardless of their wealth, that are allowed to get away with paying only 50 percent of market value.”

In 1993, William Smalley, a 53-year-old divorced trucker, moved into Carson’s Colony Cove Mobile Estates. He purchased his mobile home from his former Army platoon leader for \$43,000. Residents typically own their mobile homes but rent the land under them. Smalley’s initial monthly rent was \$328, and Carson’s mobile home rent control ordinance was in place to keep it in check.

In 2006, Smalley retired after 32 years of hauling propane on an 18-wheeler. He cashed in his 401(k), paid off all of his debts (including his mobile home) and settled in for what looked like a stable retirement in a gated community of hundreds of fellow seniors. “I was in dreamland,” Smalley said.

But that year, Goldstein bought Colony Cove. He then applied to raise rents from an average of \$413 to \$1,032, sending Smalley and his neighbors scrambling. Most of them lived off their Social Security checks and felt they could not leave Colony Cove. They had equity in their mobile homes, which despite their name can be difficult to move.

By then, Goldstein already had been notorious for two decades among mobile home park residents in Southern California. The son of a Wisconsin department store owner, Goldstein was educated in math, physics and business at Stanford and UCLA. He landed on mobile home park ownership, he said in a recent interview, “to spend as little time as possible working so that I would have the free time to do the things that I really enjoy.”

Among his first purchases, in 1986, was El Dorado Mobile Country Club in Palm Springs, a 377-site park for which Goldstein paid \$7.7 million. He immediately began applying for significant rent increases. The park’s tenants and the city resisted, resulting in court fights a judge later described as having a tenor of “mutual distrust.”

Mobile home residents’ vulnerability to opportunistic landlords — having invested in property on land they don’t own — has led states and municipalities to enact laws to protect them, including separate rent control provisions.

And in the mid-1980s, some California mobile home residents, seeking to counteract rent hikes and park closures, began exploring the concept of banding together to buy their own parks and subdivide them. In response, legislators enacted laws facilitating the conversion of mobile home parks to condo-style subdivisions.

Those laws were intended as a benefit to mobile home residents, but Goldstein saw an opportunity to apply to subdivide his own property and, in doing so, defeat rent control. If one tenant purchased a plot from Goldstein after such a conversion, the entire park would by law then be exempt from local rent control. Goldstein would be free to charge most of them whatever he wanted.

In 1993, he applied to convert El Dorado into a subdivision. When Palm Springs intervened, he sued. His lawyers claimed it would benefit the residents to own their plots, but the residents opposed it — and the city argued Goldstein was simply attempting to “secure a lifetime exemption from rent control.”

A judge later said, “This appears to be the first case in which the park owner has attempted to convert a park to resident ownership despite the opposition of the park residents.”

A judge dismissed his claim, but Goldstein appealed. In 2002, an appellate court ruled that, while it was “concerned” that the law was being used to “evade local rent control” because of a legislative oversight, there was no legal basis for the city to impose conditions on potential “sham” conversions.

Palm Springs’ attorneys relented, citing mounting legal costs. “The city just said, you know, we have fought the good fight as long we could fight it,” said Wynder, who was city attorney at the time. He said the city’s focus turned to minimizing the damage the conversion could do. As part of that agreement, the city agreed to subsidize Goldstein’s plan by making loans to residents to purchase their lots.

But after striking that deal, Goldstein sued Palm Springs again, this time for \$6 million, claiming the city’s lost fight had cost him income. Goldstein’s attorney said at the time that the lawsuit was intended to “send a message to Palm Springs and other cities that it can be very expensive to follow political whims and not the law.” The city settled that suit for just under \$1 million.

Goldstein then waged successful court battles to gain similar approval to subdivide some of his other mobile home parks. He didn’t go through with those conversions, saying he got approval to keep his “options open.” And within a year and a half of his coup in Palm Springs, at least a dozen mobile home park owners around the state followed his lead, including by suing municipalities to submit to their applications to convert their parks, according to a state Senate-produced report. That trend continued until 2013, when then-Gov. Jerry Brown signed a law limiting landlords’ ability to subdivide their parks over the objections of residents.

But Wynder said Goldstein appeared unconcerned about the impact the tactics he pioneered were having on seniors worried that they could lose their homes. The attorney recalled a rent control meeting at which one of his tenants waved a bag of pills from the dais and said, “This is what Jim Goldstein is doing to my life.”

Goldstein wasn’t there to see it, Wynder said. He was at a basketball game.

When asked about this episode, Goldstein scoffed at the suggestion that he was victimizing his tenants. He said he was the one being taken advantage of, in that rent control had made his tenants’ mobile homes more valuable by suppressing the rent.

“Do you realize that these people have homes that, if they were in a dealer’s lot, they’d be worth \$10,000?” Goldstein said. “But because those rents are 50 percent market, those people’s homes sell for \$200,000.”

Carson, a blue-collar city in southeast Los Angeles County dotted by abandoned wells from a bygone oil rush, is home to roughly two dozen mobile home parks, constituting a sizable portion of its population of under 100,000. The city has long had on its books its own laws protecting mobile home residents from steep rent increases, empowering a city board to ensure increases are “fair, just and reasonable.”

For two decades before he bought Colony Cove, Goldstein owned the park across the street, Carson Harbor Village. And he repeatedly sued the city for blocking or reducing his rent increases there.

His lawyers argued that the city’s ordinance — or as they called it, its “Rent Control Scheme” — violated the U.S. Constitution in that it transferred property value from him, the landlord, to “politically powerful mobile home park residents.” Goldstein at one point even joined the rent control board he sought to destroy, but he said he was removed by city officials because he “knew the rent control ordinance too well.”

Despite this decades-long battle with Carson’s rent control ordinance, he still agreed to pay \$23 million for Colony Cove, the seniors-only park, in 2006. For all of his complaints about the effects of rent control on his profits, Goldstein acknowledged in a recent interview that investing in properties under rent control made for sound strategy, resulting in “less risk” because full occupancy is basically guaranteed.

“Certainly, buying a property where the rents are 50 percent of market would be enticing to anybody,” Goldstein said.

All but \$5 million of his purchase of Colony Cove was financed, and Goldstein felt it was his right to factor his interest payments into a rent increase. If not, he said, he would lose upward of \$1 million per year — thus his proposed \$600-plus hike on Smalley and the others.

Carson attorney Sunny Soltani said Goldstein, fresh off his victories in Palm Springs, had agreed to pay a premium for the park because he expected to defeat rent control in Carson as well by claiming he wasn’t making a profit. But the city said that his interest payments didn’t justify a rent increase and that his proposal would have “dwarfed any rent increase awarded in the history” of its rent control ordinance. Instead, the board granted him an increase of \$36.74.

Goldstein sued, as he would in fighting for rent increases in each of the first five years he owned Colony Cove — even when he acknowledged a profit. In 2012, Goldstein said he made \$180,000 on the park but argued that was “far less than any reasonable investor would have expected.”

Goldstein’s decades-long fight with Carson culminated in a 2016 federal trial after he sued the city for years of suppressed rent hikes at Colony Cove. Arguing that officials were forcing him “to shoulder an affordable housing burden that should be borne by the City taxpayers as a whole,” Goldstein’s lawsuit claimed rent control on his mobile home park amounted to an “unconstitutional taking” of millions of dollars in lost profits.

Carson provided a bus that brought the seniors of Colony Cove to U.S. District Court in downtown Los Angeles to watch the proceedings. Goldstein testified for parts of two days. His attorney argued that “constitutional rights involve issues that are very important to only a few people — one person’s life, one person’s liberty or one man’s property in the City of Carson.”

The jurors agreed. They returned a verdict in his favor, and Carson was ordered to pay Goldstein \$7.5 million. But then the city appealed, and a higher court reversed the judgment, finding the denials of his rent increases “could not be characterized as a physical invasion by the government.” Goldstein appealed to the Supreme Court, but the justices declined to review the case.

Goldstein is still bitter about the loss. He argued that Carson had directly targeted him with a rent control guideline, published after he purchased Colony Cove, which stated landlords couldn’t bill their tenants for their own mortgage interest.

“It would be like being in a basketball game and having the rules changed in the middle of the game,” Goldstein said.

Goldstein couldn’t make it to the unveiling of the Hall of Fame gallery in his name last June. He was recovering from having badly stubbed his toe on a rock while walking on the beach in the Seychelles.

The SuperFan Gallery is situated prominently above the hardwood court that is the centerpiece of the museum in Springfield, Mass. It features an oversize photo of Goldstein shaking hands with superstar point guard Chris Paul. In addition to Goldstein’s jackets and hat and a digital display about him, the gallery includes memorabilia belonging to other super fans, such as Toronto Raptors supporter Nav Bhatia.

According to Scott Zuffelato, the Hall’s vice president of philanthropy, the gallery was part of an effort to raise roughly \$25 million for an expansion. Zuffelato and Goldstein would not say how much of that goal was provided by Goldstein.

When asked whether the Hall had concerns about Goldstein’s tactics as a landlord, Zuffelato said: “We really have focused on his basketball and the fandom he’s created around the game and what he’s done for the game. That’s where I’d leave it, because that’s what our world is.”

Goldstein also said he’s unbothered by the complaints of the senior citizens whose rising rents are partly to thank for his globe-trotting lifestyle and the honors he has received. “I don’t care about their negative opinions about me,” Goldstein said of the tenants, “but I do care about imposing hardships on them — which I haven’t done.”

It’s unclear whether Goldstein’s aggressive methods have done much for his portfolio. Sandy Marsh, one of Goldstein’s closest friends who has worked with him in real estate, said Goldstein’s fortune from mobile home parks has been built by him doing nothing. “Frankly, anybody who bought real estate, especially investment properties, 40 years ago is going to be looking quite good,” Marsh said.

By Goldstein’s own account, El Dorado hasn’t been the masterstroke he expected upon stripping it of rent control. The Palm Springs park is riddled with vacancies after residents pried their homes out of the ground or abandoned them.

In Carson, residents say they still feel vulnerable to Goldstein’s whims, such as his decision to remove the guards from the security gate at Colony Cove, which they say has led to burglaries and muggings. (Goldstein said that he had only recently been made aware of the residents’ complaints about rising crime and that he “intend[s] to follow up and pursue the possibility” of reinstating the guards.) And each year, the park’s seniors get a letter from Goldstein’s attorneys informing them that he is reserving his right to subdivide the property — and potentially throw their living situation into limbo.

“Every time this letter comes out, I get 50 phone calls” from concerned residents, said Smalley, now a spokesperson for the Colony Cove homeowners’ association.

But Smalley said for the most part, following Carson’s victories over Goldstein in court, his neighbors are on to fearing the next landlord. “We’ve had an opportunity to listen to his story in the courtroom and watch him lose and lose and lose,” Smalley said. “So the majority of the people here say: ‘I don’t give a damn about Goldstein. What I do give a damn about is, when he dies, who’s going to buy us?’ ”

Still, Goldstein has continued to steadily seek rent increases, including during the pandemic. He has applied for eight rent hikes in Carson since March 2020, according to city attorney Soltani. Goldstein defended those applications as necessary because of the “long, expensive process” to increase rents in that city.

“I would say it’s not a good thing to do if you’re going to be a good corporate citizen,” Wynder, the attorney, said of raising rents on seniors who already spent much of the pandemic isolated in their mobile homes. “But if your goal is to maximize profits so that you can afford front-row seats to Lakers and Clippers games, then you do what you have to do, I guess.”