

# Nonprofits, small businesses got hit for thousands of dollars in cash, goods and phone calls

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and cabinet. He snapped up petty cash (more than a dozen offices reported losing \$40 to \$400) and easily convertible items such as CDs and videotapes. The tempers of the daytime tenants frayed as the weeks of nocturnal pilfering stretched into months.

He had his amusements along the way, too. One was snacking on fast food or eat-

Carl's Jr. wrappings on the floor and called the cops. Nothing was missing, but the cops came over. They wanted to make sure she had notified management; she had.

A purse stolen in late August on the fourth floor made it seem like a trend in the making. The purse belonged to an administrative assistant at the San Francisco Men-

ous theories was one that suggested he got the keys off the work board when contractors were renovating the fifth floor in June.

Management, which had been the target of an organized tenants' rent hike protest at City Hall in 2000, was terribly slow reacting, tenants say, to their repeated calls for new locks and greater security. An artist who worked late at night, Jose Galindo, moved out of his office in November.

"He was spooked," says Mary Jane Galbiso. "He saw someone outside his door trying to get in one night. He said he just couldn't work under those circumstances. He thought management was trying to scare us out."

Galbiso has her Reall real estate company office on the third floor. It was hit hard and dented several times. She lost a cell phone, a digital camera, petty cash, computer materials—even a men's bicycle was stolen. The thief also opened an AOL account to tap into the sex material. Galbiso filed two police reports listing her losses at \$3,371. She asked police to take prints and they refused. She changed her locks and wrote a blistering letter of complaint to management.

"It's their responsibility for security," she says. "It's their negligence."

Suspicion rose in the ranks among the tenants who usually act, in Crew's words, "like an extended family." A tenant came to Crew with a name he thought was the thief. "No," Crew says, "it wasn't one of ours. We are always suspect because we are mental health-involved people."

A more prominent rumor was that the thief was a present or past member of the Bicycle Coalition on the second floor.

"That was scary," Crew says. "They are a nonprofit and hard-working young kids and they're getting it (burglarized), too. That's sad."

Theft in the Grant Building, top-heavy with nonprofits, probably isn't like elsewhere because even a small loss cuts deep. The loss of a \$700 Toshiba laptop can be devastating. Self-Help's total losses, as reported to the police, were valued at \$5,698.

"Some tenants in the building are one check away from being homeless themselves," Crew says. "Nonprofits live by the skin of their teeth. Businesses like ours can't take big hits.

And there we were, totally exposed."

Among other nonprofits the thief hit were Street Side Stories and Agape Foundation. Street Side, on the second floor, is a 10-year-old arts for youth program that goes to public middle schools to enhance communication skills through reading, writing and theater. It lost \$177 in petty cash. Agape Foundation on the third floor makes grants to organizations working for peace and justice.

"I knew one thing, he wasn't violent," says Agape Executive Director Karen Topakian. "And he came in late at night after I was gone. So I didn't feel vulnerable. But we have donations (checks) and information about people and credit cards. Protecting the foundation was my concern."

One morning she came in and the deadbolt was unlocked. Strange. Some weeks later she noticed among returned bank checks one cashed far out of sequence. She examined a book of them in a desk drawer. Sure enough, five in the series were missing. The check was for \$160.56 made out to the thief. "Not very creative," she says.

Reluctantly the bank refunded her money. She canceled the other checks. The police asked her to go with one of them up to the eighth floor to ask management to

change everyone's locks.

"Management refused," Topakian says. "They said it was too much money and the technology didn't exist." She sighs. "Weak excuses."

Straightening up her mess cost Topakian a couple of days of work. She bought a lockable file cabinet for \$140 and stewed over paying \$25 each for two keys management was demanding from everyone for the building's new front door lock—when finally it was changed.

For weeks, the San Francisco Study Center reacted like most offices. The 30-year-old private nonprofit is a publisher, including *Central City Extra*, and is fiscal sponsor of a number of human service programs. Its flagship suite of offices on the sixth floor is the granddaddy of the Grant Building tenants.

That \$50 missing from Study Center's petty cash could have been a staffer paying for supplies. A couple of phone cards were gone, too. They'll show up. The Center had six Cosco gift certificates. One was missing, prob-

ably misplaced. A box of popcorn was left out. But nobody in the office had eaten popcorn. And some clothing was found in the copier room.

"You speculate," says Study Center staffer and writer Phil Tracy. "It's a big office. People come and go. We had heard, too, at one point that the cleaning staff had lost their keys."

Uncertainty vanished the morning of Oct. 21. Geoffrey Link, the Study Center executive director, sat down to his computer and was flabbergasted by what he saw. He called Tracy in for a technical explanation of this overnight phenomenon.

"On his screen was a shortcut to the sex industry," Tracy said. The resulting AT&T bill from the thief's porn viewing is still being challenged (see sidebar), but the subsequent 900 number blocks on all Study Center lines cost \$400. New locks on the doors cost \$300.

With the arrival of a bill on Oct 23, Study Center discovered that its \$200 cell phone was missing, likely stolen in mid-September. It was on a limited-use \$35 monthly fee because it was only operated one day a month, used to monitor and direct out-of-doors lunches and field trips for mental health clients. Suddenly, across the transom came an

astonishing bill for \$3,350. Before the account could be closed, late charges drove it up to \$3,500. It is still being negotiated.

In November, when tenants say the second round of thefts began, the Study Center found behind some boxes in its storage room a wardrobe stash. In a bag—more than a half dozen shirts and sweaters, shorts, socks, towels, blankets, pillow slips, shaving kit, a condom, burrito wrappers—and an old front door key.

There also was a T-shirt from the Agape Foundation and a Bicycle Coalition shoulder bag.

By now, the occupants were being duly informed by e-mails from the community-conscious tenants among them, "doing what management should have done," says Ron Brook, a City Lights editor on the fourth floor. "I started asking around and people volunteered stories," Brook says. "So I was just trying to alert people. The guy was half smart."

There had been brief encounters with the thief. The assistant to Bob Armstrong of Columbia Books on the fourth floor had walked in on him early one evening. He explained he was an old friend from out of

town, a tenant had let him in the building and the light was on and the door open. The assistant said Armstrong was out of town.

When, he wanted to know, would he be back so he could see him?

A few days later Armstrong learned of the fraud. Weeks later, his office was robbed of 150 CDs. Armstrong's police report estimated their low side value at \$1,500.

Another night the thief walked into the Bicycle Coalition, surprised to see a worker there. He said he was making security checks, then turned around and left.

"When I heard of this the next day I asked if there was night security, and there wasn't any," the office's Nancy Botkin says. Indeed, Executive Director Dave Synder confirmed that the man, Ron Salkin, had never been in the organization's database.

Bicycle Coalition lost \$400 in petty cash and a \$500 digital camera and often found garbage around. Botkin thought maybe the items were misplaced. To test the waters, though, she marked an envelope "cash" and left it out one night. It disappeared.

"I put blank paper in it," she says. "When it was gone, that's when I knew. But he was never a Bicycle Coalition member. He had a bike, and he would tell people he was a member."

From the descriptions, and the name Agape's Karen Topakian provided, Bicycle Coalition made a warning flyer and posted it in the elevators and corridors. But the flyers soon disappeared.

Building management did change the locks of several burglarized offices and those offices ceased being victims. But one puzzlement had folks reeling.

In other offices, the burglaries continued unabated, even after the front door lock was replaced Nov. 1 and the tenants were charged \$25 per key.

In Room 404, Mansour Vahdat of Midtown Stationers puts his finger on the counter where the envelope

marked "new key" was left for the early morning delivery man.

"We were the first to get the key because we need it every day for deliveries," Vahdat, a partner in the company, explains. "But that night the thief came in and took the new key and put his old one in the envelope. But we didn't know this had happened for a long, long time."

That's because when the key didn't work the delivery man asked the newspaper vendor outside who keeps a key to let him in. The delivery man left Vahdat a note saying the key didn't work. Vahdat thought afterward that the delivery man had figured out how to use the new key because he kept getting in. But every day he was being let in. It went on like that for weeks.

"But then I saw him once and he told me," Vahdat says, his eyes widening. "I couldn't believe it could happen! Do you know what I am saying?"

Nothing else was ever stolen from Midtown Stationers. And Vahdat never told management about the key.

The thief was caught on Martin Luther King Day. He was cornered in his underwear in Oasis, the Office of Self-Help's community center on the second floor.

The two newspaper vendors, Jay and Herb, who work the stand outside, knew the thief by sight. They had told the tenants about the late night comings and early exits of the thieving dark-haired man who claimed he worked there. In December and January, at the crack of dawn, they were calling Roy Crew at home whenever they had an on-site spotting. Crew and Kevin Leach, a former bicycle messenger who works now for Self-Help, would race at 7 a.m. to the Grant Building and try to surprise the thief.

"New Year's Day we missed him by 10 minutes," Crew says. "My nephew was with me. He's a Solano County detective. But I had a feeling about Martin Luther King Day. Something told me to go down."

He and Leach arrived at 7:15 a.m. Leach took care of his bicycle downstairs and Crew went up. At the landing he was startled to see a shadowy figure passing on the other side of the office door's smoky glass pane. He barged in. The man was a 5-foot-8 Hispanic with a pony tail and just pulling on his trousers. A bowl of chili and a half loaf of bread were on the counter of Self-Help's

Social Room..

"What are you doing here!" Crew demanded.

"I work here," he replied. Crew glared at him and reality set in.

"I work in the building," he said, correcting himself. "Then why are you in this office?"

Crew didn't know at the time how much had been stolen over time throughout the building. He didn't particularly want to see anyone go to jail, and he said he might have let the guy go if he had just turned over the master keys when Crew demanded the keys from him. But the thief denied having them. That's when Crew picked up the phone and called the police.

They didn't come. The thief kept eyeing the door between him and the marble steps beyond. Tension was building.

"If you get to those steps," the thin, 6-foot-tall Crew said evenly, "I will ride you down like a sled."

Doctors told Crew 18 years ago that he had HIV and wouldn't live six months. So he made his peace. He claims that any fearlessness he shows now stems simply from his feeling of living on borrowed time.

He called the police again. "Better hurry," he said. Now the thief begged to be let go, said he would do anything for Crew, but Crew wasn't listening.

Leach appeared in the adjacent room and saw what was going on. He went to the window to look for the police just as they were arriving. He opened the window and yelled, "Up here!" then dashed downstairs to let them in. As they all came back up the steps, the thief grabbed some things, burst out of the room and flew

down the corridor in his stocking feet. They all chased after him, but lost him at the next stairwell. The four cops, crew and Leach all went different ways to search up and down, with some going off to guard exit doors.

Leach, 6-foot-1 and 180 pounds, found the thief back on the second floor. "By then I was mad," Leach said. He had to wrestle him to the ground in front of an office, yelling all the time so the others could converge on

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Bicycle Coalition shoulder bag and an Agape Foundation T-shirt were among the thief's belongings found stuffed in the corner of the Study Center's copy room.

ing out of dishes he found, sleeping on couches, then flagrantly leaving trash behind like untidy spoor. His trail became an exasperating taunt. Robbed or not, tenants felt violated. Some were scared to work late at night. One tenant moved out. Finally, out of desperation, a self-appointed vigilance committee began making early morning visits to try to catch the night thief as he awoke.

Security guard Will Dow sits on a stool behind a lectern just inside the Grant Building's front door five days a week, 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Since taking over the job from his father nine years ago, Dow has greeted everyone with a smile and salutation. Naturally, he was the one who heard the first rumblings. An office window was found open. A computer was found on. Strange.

"I leave the building at 5:30 and lock it," Dow says. "Some tenants work late, say 9 or 10, and they let themselves out. Just about all of them keep petty cash around."

Strange soon turned to sure-fire trespassing.

"We didn't know there was a thief in the building," says Louella del Castillo, a 10-year tenant who has The Print Shop on the third floor. "I came in one morning and there was a dirty bowl on the couch and a newspaper on the floor. I told the building management. I think it was late summer."

Three weeks later she found a bag of trash and

tal Health Association, a venerable advocacy and policy nonprofit. The assistant lost a small amount of cash, credit cards, driver's license and house keys. "Later we lost petty cash (\$40) too," Belinda Lyons, program director, says. "Jars of nuts were taken, vitamin pills in my drawer were opened and scattered on the desk, and we found an open bottle of tequila." The office also got hit for \$120 in 976 porn-phone charges, which they luckily didn't have to pay.

The pressure began to mount among the tenants for having management change the locks. In October, thefts continued, but some weren't detected until November.

"You could sense something was wrong in the beginning, but you couldn't put your finger on it," says Roy Crew, director of the Office of Self-Help in Room 202, a haven for people trying to stay on their feet. "Food was disappearing. We try to provide food for our clients that they couldn't otherwise afford."

"At first I wondered if staff was doing it." He grimaces. "That's what annoys me most. This brought suspicion on people who didn't deserve it."

Self-Help, like many offices, was finding—in addition to trash and dirty dishes—clothing and objects brought in from other offices. It was like the thief was flaunting a newfound omnipotence.

It was rumored that the thief had a set of master keys. Among vari-