

Marijuana growers make ‘good’ tenants

By: Kim Cook

Have you ever jumped out of bed on a beautiful Thursday morning and thought, “Life is good!”? You know, one of those mornings when the sun is shining, the birds are singing, you can smell the fresh coffee brewing, and the newspaper is laying on the front porch instead of being shredded out in the yard by the neighbor’s dog? Then you take the peaceful drive to one of your rental houses, only to discover that it has been turned into a half a million dollar marijuana growing factory?

That was Lonnie Castillo’s morning a few Thursday’s ago.

After hearing Lonnie relay this horror story on his radio ‘home improvement’ show on 640AM one Saturday afternoon, I knew that I had to interview him. Lonnie, who owns the home building consulting company ‘UBuildIt’ in Buford, and his business partner, Pat Taylor, give solid, how-to advice on their home repair show. You can hear them every Saturday on Braves Radio 640AM GST from 11am to 1pm.

Following is an account of Lonnie’s day in the marijuana factory.

Lonnie bought the nine acre investment property in Monroe, Georgia about five years ago with the intention of holding it for future development. He was proud of his first investment home and after months of sweat equity, Lonnie found a perfect tenant who promised to care for the home as if it were her own. A year later the perfect tenant called Lonnie to advise him that she had a roommate. In June 2004, the perfect tenant informed Lonnie that she had to move; however, the roommate was willing to continue to rent the property. Lonnie did what all good Landlords do, he signed a new lease with the roommate and advised him that the rent was due on the first and late by the fifth.

Unlike the last tenant, who always needed something repaired, Lonnie never heard from the new tenant. The rent was always paid on time, and Lonnie never had to worry about bounced checks because the tenant always paid in money orders.

Life changes as life does, and the time came for Lonnie to sell the property. In January 2005, Lonnie called the tenant to advise him of the pending sale and of his need to vacate the property. For three months Lonnie left messages for the tenant to call him. The rent still came on time, but the tenant never returned Lonnie’s phone calls. Finally, Lonnie left the tenant a message asking him to leave the gate unlocked as he was bringing a real estate agent out to list the property.

On Thursday morning, as the sky was bright and the birds were singing, Lonnie and the agent were climbing over the *locked* gate and hiking up to his rental house. Realizing that no one was home and the door locks had been changed, Lonnie used his ‘investor key’ to gain entry into his property. Then, as they say, the ‘pot’ thickens.

As Lonnie climbed through the bathroom window, he realized the house was unusually dark for such a bright and shiny day. Every room had black plastic over the windows and heavy tarps separated the living room from the rest of the house. The only furniture in the house was a recliner and a table covered with ‘High Times’ magazines, ‘The Growers Handbook’, PH testers, and other assorted drug paraphernalia. Seems the tenant had a ‘stay-at-home’ business!

Lonnie opened the front door and told the real estate agent that, more than likely, they would not be listing the property today. Upon inspecting the bedrooms Lonnie found hundreds of marijuana plants, most of which were over five feet high. Pots and pots of pot. Crates built around the walls were full of pot seedlings. Pot was hanging upside down in the closets. Pot seeds were being hatched in the laundry room-turned nursery. (I wonder how the word marijuana ever got the name 'pot'?) Garbage cans full of water (pot sprayers) were all over the house. The HVAC system had been rerouted to ventilate the pot smell out of the house. All of the light fixtures were removed and a motorized track light system, designed to simulate natural light, was installed in every room. The tenant was a pro pot grower!

The agent told Lonnie that he should call the police. Lonnie's first thought, as any good real estate investor's would be, was 'What day is it, the third? I haven't received the rent check yet!' But, being a good citizen, Lonnie called the police and within five minutes, Walton County's finest wheeled up to find Lonnie, obviously their number one suspect, surveying his 'rental-home-turned-pot-farm' nightmare. The police, trying to poke holes in his story, asked Lonnie the same question a thousand different ways; "So, if you don't live here, why did you come here?"

After the initial shock wore off, the police put chills down Lonnie's back by telling him that he was lucky there were no booby traps (common in these situations) set to explode the house when the lights were turned on.

That same night, the police arrested the 'perps' (allegedly, allegedly) as they drove up the driveway in route to water the plants. They arrested the 'master horticulturalist' the next morning while he lay sleeping in bed in another county. According to the police, the marijuana and the growing tools had a street value of over \$400,000. That's 'big-boy' jail for these fellers.

If there were ever an argument to keep a close watch on your investment property, this would be one. The Walton County Detective has assured Lonnie that his property will not be seized as evidence, but as you can imagine, Lonnie will be glad when he has that in writing!

Though Lonnie is now facing a massive rehab to get the house ready to sell, he can take a little comfort in the fact that before the tenant was arrested, he complied with his lease agreement and mailed the \$1200.00 rent check!

By the way, Lonnie has a great property for sale, an investor special! A 3 bedroom, 2 bath brick ranch on 9 acres in Monroe. For more information call 770 271-2293 or check out his website at www.atlantahomeimprovementshow.com