

Foreclosure Cleanup Crews Busy in Current Housing Market

Nick Hazel may not have the perfect job, but he's got plenty of work at the moment. The Associated Press recently followed Hazel on his daily rounds tending to government-owned foreclosed homes. It might not be pretty, but Hazel's routine sheds some light into the reality left behind in family homes missing their families.

At one home in Groveland, Florida (one of the states hit hardest by the housing bubble collapse) Hazel finds fire ants and a hornets' nest before he can even get the key into the lock.

Hazel is a "property preservationist," and his services have never been in greater demand. Thousands of people a week continue to default on mortgages and banks rely on Hazel and others like him to "trash out" and seal up the homes that the bank owns but doesn't want, and can't do much with in the current climate.

At the Groveland, Florida address, Hazel finds a broken dishwasher, a countertop range missing its coils, showers missing fixtures, toilets missing seats, and holes in the ceiling where fans used to be.

"At least these guys left the wiring," he says.

Hazel mows lawns that come up to his waist. He often discovers squatters, and he's constantly fighting decay and boarding up broken windows. More often than not, he trucks away trash. Preservationists like Hazel are tasked with holding the line in a world filled with homes no one can afford to live in. He tries to keep the homes in shape in anticipation of better times.

"I'm like a dentist," he says, "Nobody likes to see me, but when a house's teeth go bad, who else is going to clean out the rot?"

In a typical week, Hazel will inspect 90 structures, lock down 20 more, and clears trash from another 20 owned by the banks. His business has doubled in the past year, which was his first in the business. Hazel saw a market growing and jumped in, and now he employs his wife, son, and five workers.

It's not easy money. Hazel has opened kitchen drawers and found startled rats hiding inside. He has stumbled upon a massive hornets' nest that dwarfs the one he discovers this morning. He's discovered false teeth, Christmas toys, and aquariums filled with live rattlesnakes.

Just as intriguing is what he *doesn't* find. Once, he found a dining room missing its ceiling. Bathrooms missing their floor tiles, granite countertops, bathroom fixtures, crown molding stripped from every room in a large house.

This year, 1 in 33 homes in Florida has received a [foreclosure](#) filing. When Hazel got into the business last year, he was tending to homes lost by opportunists who had made money "flipping" homes and gambling on the unsustainable market. But even then, a growing number of homes had belonged to homeowners who had committed to adjustable rate mortgages and paid the price later.

The one-time cable TV installer decided to get into the business and work on his own terms. Six days a week, he's up before dawn, getting into his work clothes (jeans, T-shirt, Timberland boots) and using a GPS to find his first home of the day, located in any one of nine counties across Florida's center. He spends his days walking through mementos left behind by occupants long-gone, but regards them with only a detached interest.

"You know, if you think about this stuff all the time, it'll drive you crazy. That's why I don't like doing it. Slows you down."