

## Metamorphosis

**By Mort Laitner**

One of the early lessons a public health attorney learns is that there are two types of environmental health inspectors. The type “X” inspector actively seeks out vermin with a Tony Montana attitude, “I’ll bury those cock-a-roaches.” While the Type “Y” inspector fails to see a *Men in Black* giant cockroach-like alien threatening the destruction of the planet.

Here is the story of two such inspectors Bill and Charlie.

I was accompanying these two gentlemen on separate days to learn about nursing home inspections.

On Tuesday, when Charlie and I entered the Miami Shoreline Nursing Home, we were greeted as royalty by the staff. It was an “unannounced” visit but the employees did not seem surprised. We were also greeted by the odor of human decomposition mixed with a heavy dose of deodorizer. Charlie appeared to have lost his sense of smell.

“Charlie, would you and your friend like some breakfast?”

“No!” Charlie exclaimed.

The staff looked bewildered.

“Well, how about a freshly brewed cup of java?”

“Not today, I’m training the health department lawyer.”

Suddenly, their faces expressed an all-knowing look.

As we entered the kitchen, Charlie tightly held his clipboard professionally noting the name and address of the facility on his inspection sheet. At a quick pace, he rushed through the kitchen, not moving a pot or a pan. He carried no crack and crevice insecticide applicator spray to force the roaches out of hiding. I quizzed Charlie about his knowledge of roaches, “Charlie, are there different types of cockroaches?”

He answered, “I don’t remember, but I think they’re called German, Asian, Oriental and American.”

Then I asked Charlie about the University of Florida study that I had recently read. Charlie was not familiar with the study that showed that cockroaches leave chemical trails in their feces, so other roaches follow the trails to discover food, water and where roaches are hiding.

What he did study was his inspection sheet. He acted like he had never seen one before. He never lifted his head to find a violation. His attitude was, “I do not live here, and who cares the people who do.”

Through all the bedrooms and bathrooms, Charlie did not find a single violation. Then we sat down in the administrator’s office for Charlie to present his completed inspection form. We were again greeted like close family.

The administrator said, “Charlie, How are Grete, Gregor and Franz doing? Would you and the lawyer like some coffee?”

“We’ll skip it today. Maybe next time. My family is doing fine. Thanks for asking.” Charlie replied.

I was surprised that the administrator knew the name of Charlie's wife and kids.

Charlie commented, "You run a tip-top, ship-shape nursing home. Keep up the good work." This overly-friendly administrator smiled as he heard Charlie's findings.

As we left the home, I glanced at Charlie's work product, seeing no violations and an excellent rating. I felt dirty.

The next mornings, Bill, wearing his white ten-gallon cowboy hat, and I went on our unannounced inspection of Naranja Lakes Nursing Home. As we walked in the door, Bill greeted the staff with a loud ear-shaking, "Howdy!"

The metamorphic change on the staff's faces from smiles to frowns was as noticeable as a skunk at a lawn party. They remembered Bill from his last inspection. They recalled how hard they had to work to correct the health violations. The sheriff was back in town. Bill remembered how this administration did not want to pay for pest control services.

Bill bellowed, "These administrative folks are tighter than bark on a tree."

There was no offer of coffee or breakfast.

They wanted us to leave as quickly as we appeared.

Their hostile tone could be heard in their words, as Bill hunted down roaches like a hound dog.

"How can we help you?"

"Which parts of the home are you going to inspect?"

"Please wait here as we get the administrator."

They used all these dilatory tactics to slow us down so that the janitorial staff could get a jump start for some last-minute cleaning. Bill politely answered the questions,

not stopping as we moved from room to room, smelling, eying, touching and spraying every nook and cranny of the home. Roaches jumped out of electrical sockets. He drew his white pen from his pocket and noted every violation from cockroaches to torn window screens.

Bill would often ask me while he recorded the violations: “Would you want your grandma to live here?”

I replied, “Absolutely not!”

“Then let’s get this home in shape so someone else’s grandma will live in a clean and safe home.”

Bill knew roaches. He was aware that they can remain alive for a month without food, and that their lifespan was up to a year. Bill read the national study on factors that affect asthma in inner-city children which showed that cockroach allergens worsen asthma symptoms. Bill was acquainted the preventive measures to keep roaches out of nursing homes: food stored in sealed containers, using garbage cans with tight lids, frequently cleaning the kitchen and regular vacuuming. All of which were lacking at this nursing home.

As we left the home, I felt clean. I thanked Bill for mentoring me. In his best western accent he twanged, “Pardner, this ain’t my first rodeo, so remember what you learned today.” Then he rode off into the sunset in his white 1967 Mustang convertible.

Scratching my head, I thought about the differences between Bill and Charlie.

There are people, like Bill, who care. While others, like Charlie, have undergone a Kafkaesque transformation.

