

Woman Says Ferrets That Alert Her To Seizures May Cause Her Eviction

A Pennsylvania woman faces eviction from her apartment because of her ferrets even though she claims they are service animals that warn her of impending seizures.

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Lucy Gwin's ferrets are at the center of a battle for her to stay in her apartment at The George Washington Hotel in Washington, Pa., where she has lived since October 2007. The hotel sought to evict her based on a no-pets policy, she said. Gwin refused to give up her ferrets, contending that her ferrets are service animals, her copy of the lease doesn't mention the no-pets policy and the management knew about her ferrets from the beginning. Local news sources reported that representatives for the hotel stated that Gwin never mentioned she owned ferrets during discussions about her renting the apartment, and the hotel offered to let her stay if she got rid of her ferrets. Efforts to reach a hotel representative for comments on this article were unsuccessful.

The eviction case went to court in late March and the judge ruled in favor of the hotel. Because the case was ruled on in only five to 10 minutes, Gwin said she believes the judge's mind was made up before hearing the case, and the point about ferrets as service animals wasn't considered. She also believes that the real reason for her eviction is because she had begun complaining about disparate treatment of disabled people at the hotel.

Gwin has appealed and plans to remain living at the hotel with her ferrets until the appeals process is complete.

For the past 18 years, Lucy Gwin said her ferrets have warned her when she was on the verge of suffering a seizure – not just one ferret, but every ferret she's had. Gwin said the seizures are the result of injuries sustained when she was hit by a drunk driver. Since the first time she suffered a seizure at home, her ferrets have warned her, but it took a couple of times for her to realize what the ferrets were doing, she said.

"When I'm about to have a seizure, they look very unhappy," Gwin said. "They come over and bump my legs, like they're trying to correct me or stop me from having the seizure."

Gwin has learned that if she doesn't heed this warning by immediately stopping what she's doing, lying down and perhaps taking medication, a seizure will hit her in the next 10 or 15 minutes. She's still not sure how the ferrets sense an impending seizure, whether it's through a smell, a vibration or what. "Something's going on that they don't like," Gwin said.

According to Gwin, it takes about three weeks to "get back to being human" after a seizure. She said that during those three weeks she's groggy, can't think, her head hurts, she's sick to her stomach and she aches all over.

Gwin currently has four ferrets – Idi, Odo, Rooty and Tooty – that enjoy free-roam in her home. She's had Idi and Odo, a male and female, for six years and both are suffering health issues. Rooty and Tooty, both males, joined her family a little more than a year ago. Even though Rooty and Tooty are new to the family, they're already picking up on Gwin's special need. When she was packing to move last summer, three of the ferrets came running at her to warn her of an impending seizure.

Local television and various news articles covered Gwin's eviction, which brought her situation to the attention of people in the ferret community, among others. Gwin said she hopes that anyone else with a ferret that alerts of impending seizures or a similar task will contact her by e-mail here, because this information could help with her appeal.

When first diagnosed, Gwin said her doctor told her she should avoid taking regular seizure medication. Gwin said such medications make her stupid and unable to think. She doesn't believe she could do her job as a journalist for a disability rights magazine if she was continuously medicated. She said her doctor also told her to find a way to deal with the seizures without medication. Gwin has learned to avoid known triggers for her seizures, such as fluorescent lights and multi-tasking, and her ferrets provide an early warning system for other times.

No matter what the future brings, Gwin said she'll keep her ferrets. "I need them, they need me. They're my friends. How do you get rid of your friends?"