

## Real Estate

### YOUR HOME

# Flood, Mold And Mildew Damage

By JAY ROMANO

**A**FTER 65 years in the business of drying out wet houses, Max Gersh remembers one job more clearly than the rest. He calls it "The Cube of Mold."

"A water pipe broke in the house while the owners were away," said Mr. Gersh, the founder of Maxons Restorations in Manhattan. "There were five feet of water in the basement. It was summer, and the water would evaporate and rise to the upper floors during the day, and then rain back down into the basement at night. It was so humid in there we had to pry open the front door."

Once inside, Mr. Gersh saw something that surprised even him.

"There was mold on everything," he said. "Every chair, every bed, every carpet and every wall was covered with mold. Even the felt hammers in the piano were moldy. The house was a cube of mold."

The immensity of the damage, Mr. Gersh explained, was attributable to the fact that the condition had existed for several weeks before it was discovered. Nevertheless, he said, any flooding in a house — whether caused by a broken pipe, a clogged sewer line or a bashing by Mother Nature — can cause serious problems.

But there are ways to deal with water when it's where it doesn't belong, and things to avoid while doing so.

"The first thing you don't do is touch anything electric when you're standing on a wet floor," said Jerome Konsker, owner of Konsker Electric in Long Island City, Queens.

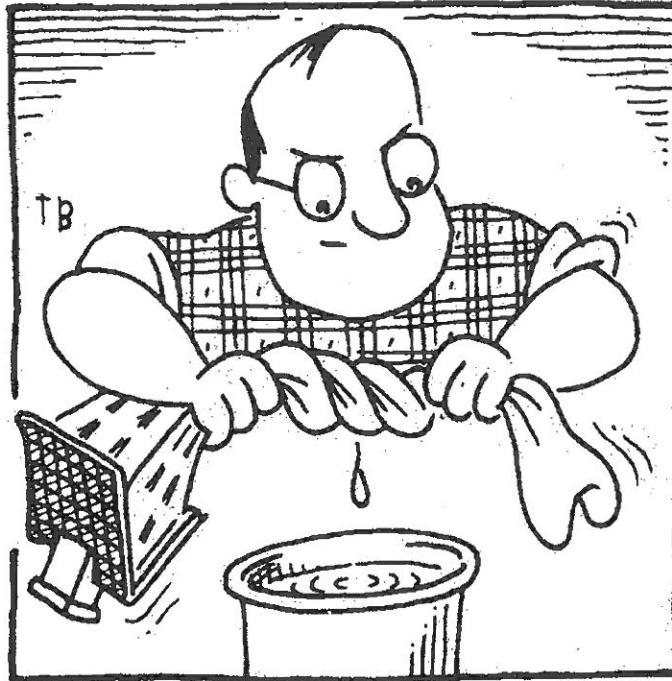
While that may seem obvious, Mr. Konsker said, it is not uncommon for people who have a flood in their basement to wade through the water to turn on lights or turn off appliances. In fact, he said, even with just a few inches of water — enough, for example, to saturate live electrical outlets near the floor — it is dangerous to be there in the first place.

"You wouldn't play with your radio while you're sitting in the bathtub," Mr. Konsker said. "Well, when you're wading around in ankle-deep water, the whole basement's a bathtub."

Accordingly, he said, the best thing to do when water has soaked anything connected to an electrical circuit — including furnace motors, washers and dryers and wall outlets — is to call in an expert.

"If you don't know what you're doing," Mr. Konsker said, "don't do it."

William A. Farley, district service supervisor for Public Service Electric & Gas



Tom Bloom

### A few tips on safety and otherwise coping when water makes a mess of the house.

Company in Newark, said that homeowners with gas-powered appliances — hot water heaters, furnaces and clothes dryers — should be particularly careful after a flood.

"If the gas controls of the equipment have been submerged in water, I wouldn't recommend turning it back on," Mr. Farley said. He explained that while most appliances had safety mechanisms that prevent gas from escaping, it is possible that water in the vents and ducts of those appliances could prevent the machine from igniting properly.

"You could be setting yourself up for a delayed ignition," Mr. Farley said, using the industry's term for what is more commonly known as an explosion.

Charles Fisher, a manager in gas engineering at Consolidated Edison of New York City, said that gas clothes dryers in particular might exhibit rather unusual — and dangerous — behavior in a flood.

"They float," Mr. Fisher said. "And when a clothes dryer floats, the flexible hose that connects it to the gas supply is stressed."

As a result, he said, Con Edison recommends that homeowners with flood-prone basements leave the door of their dryer open so it will fill with water instead of becoming buoyant.

Damon Gersh, Max's son and president of

Maxons, said that after standing water has been pumped out of a house, there then remains the more difficult job of drying out everything that got wet.

"Whenever you have a water damage in a house, you basically have a 72-hour window of opportunity to reverse it," Mr. Gersh said.

This is because unlike fire damage — which is unlikely to worsen after the fire is out — water can continue to cause problems long after the flood has receded. Residual dampness in walls and under carpets can cause as much damage as the initial submersion. In addition to permanently weakening carpet fibers and softening sheetrock walls, imbedded dampness can warp wood floors, shrink drapes and even curl pictures in rooms that were not involved in the original flood.

"If we can get in there early enough and get the drying process started, we can usually save most things in a house," Mr. Gersh. "But the most important thing to worry about, from the point of view of people living in the house, is mold and mildew." He noted that mold and

mildew spores — which are present in the atmosphere — need only warmth, darkness and moisture to get a foothold and flourish.

Accordingly, Mr. Gersh said, the first thing that must be done after standing water has been removed is to prevent mold and mildew from forming by treating all damp surfaces with a mildew inhibitor and then thoroughly drying everything out.

"If your basement is flooded, you can have a humidity reading of over 90 percent," Mr. Gersh said. "So what you have to do is get the humid air out and get dry air in."

One way to do that is by opening windows and doors and using floor-level fans to create cross ventilation. Another way to accelerate drying is through the judicious application of heating and air conditioning.

"Many people immediately turn up the thermostat following water damage in the mistaken belief that they are drying things out," Mr. Gersh said, adding that using heat alone will only result in increasing the humidity. And that, in turn, will transport moisture throughout the house.

Instead of just cranking up the thermostat, he said, what a homeowner should do first is turn on the air-conditioning.

"Set the thermostat at the coolest level possible," he said. Then, after the house has been thoroughly chilled, the air-conditioning should be turned off, the heat should be turned on and the windows and doors should be shut tight.

"As the cool air warms it will act as a sponge," Mr. Gersh said. After the temperature has risen considerably — even to the point of discomfort — the heat should be turned off, the windows and doors should be opened, and the moisture-laden air should be evacuated with fans and cross-ventilation, he added.

"The cycle should be repeated until adequate drying has occurred," Mr. Gersh said, pointing out that in most cases, when a house has carpeting, disaster recovery experts will also remove any soaked padding from beneath the carpet and treat the floor and the underside of the carpet with a mildew inhibitor such as Pine Sol.

"Just vacuuming water out of a carpet usually isn't enough," he said. "Because the padding traps water and prevents the carpet from ever really drying out."

Finally, Mr. Gersh said, the most effective way to protect valuable items from water damage is to keep them in a safe place to begin with.

"For some reason, people seem to keep things like photo albums, wedding dresses, yearbooks and old love letters in boxes in the basement," he said. "And it's only after a disaster hits that they realize how valuable those things are."

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