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LATE CITY FINAL

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Father knows best

Priest on a mission to house poor

By RITA DELFINER

John Powis spends so much time at Brooklyn's Housing Court battling to help poor tenants in Bushwick facing eviction that some judges say, "Here's the monsignor again."

Father Powis, 71, retired last year as pastor of St. Barbara's Roman Catholic Church and says now that he has no administrative tasks — he can "be with people almost all day long and listen to



GIMME SHELTER: Father John Powis with some young tenants of 213 Himrod St. in Brooklyn whom he is helping to avoid eviction by a mortgage company.



LIBERTY MEDAL NOMINEE

what I can do to give them consolation or help."

The scrappy shepherd, who has championed his inner city flocks since becoming a priest over 45 years ago, was nominated for the Liberty Lifetime Achievement medal by lifelong friend Neil Sullivan.

"A lady walked in today and said she was afraid her children were going to suffocate," said Powis. He went right to her house and found that the landlord had illegally divided apartments, leaving some rooms without windows.

"Until someone

screams and yells, they could be living there until one of the kids does die in a room that has no windows in a heat spell," said Powis, whose Bushwick Housing Independence Project immediately reported the landlord.

Powis suffers from Parkinson's disease and

"very bad" diverticulitis, but is still the energetic advocate who first became an activist in the 1960s over the issue of school decentralization.

In the late 1970s Powis helped found East Brooklyn Congregations, whose Nehemiah project has built thousands of homes for the poorest of families.

And a decade ago he went to court to challenge a city plan to eliminate sidewalk fire alarm boxes. Powis argued that 30 percent of Bushwick residents had no phone to report a fire.

"I may not win every battle, but you must be able to stand up and say 'This is not a good idea,'" he said.