

Tim Stelloh et al., *Couple who bought house from Utah mom charged with killing husband feel like ‘bystanders in her path of destruction,’* NBC News, Sept. 22, 2023

A Utah family blames the children’s grief author Kouri Richins, who has been accused of



Taryn and Alec Wright

fatally spiking her husband’s cocktail with fentanyl, for their near financial ruin since buying from her a remodeled house that they say they've had to evacuate because of “hazardous” levels of mold and an onslaught of mysterious medical problems.

"There was no trying to right any of the wrongs that she had thrown at us," Taryn Wright, 38, told “Dateline” in her first interview about her lawsuit against Richins. “We’re just innocent bystanders in her path of destruction.”

"Hazardous” levels of mold in the home Alec and Taryn Wright bought three years ago from Richins’ realty company has left them teetering on the edge, struggling to pay the mortgage on a house they no longer live in, and barely able to cover rent on the home they live in now, they told “Dateline.”

For more on Kouri Richins, tune into “Page Turner” tonight on Dateline at 10 p.m./9 p.m. CT.

The couple sued Richins and her realty company in November, roughly six months before she was charged with murder in the March 4, 2022, death of Eric Richins.

Richins’ lawyers have denied the murder allegation, saying in a court filing after her arrest that there was no substantial evidence to support the charges. After her husband’s death, Richins wrote the children's book “Are You With Me?” about grief.

The Wrights’ civil lawsuit, filed in Utah’s Fourth Judicial District Court, alleges breach of



Kouri and Eric Richins

contract and fraud. The complaint alleges Richins misrepresented important facts about the property’s habitability and value “recklessly and without regard for the truth.”

The bank manager and the stay-at-home mom want Richins to cover repairs on property damage that they say amounts to a complete loss, as well as damages for a range of illnesses that allegedly began after their family moved into the nearly 2,000-square-foot home in January 2020.

In a court filing earlier this year, lawyers for Richins denied the Wrights’ allegations. Her company, Richins Realty, made a “fulsome disclosure,” the filing says, adding that the home’s alleged defects could have been discovered through a “reasonable inspection by an ordinary prudent buyer.”

Richins' lawyer handling the civil case declined to comment and referred a reporter to public filings in which they rejected the homeowners' allegations.



Drywall was removed and mold was discovered in the home of Alec and Taryn Wright.

Drowning in debt

The home, in Heber City, southeast of Salt Lake City, was part of a house-flipping business that Richins launched in 2019, prosecutors said in a June court filing.

Within a couple of years, the business was drowning in debt — Richins owed lenders \$1.8 million by February 2022 — and prosecutors alleged that she engaged in “fraud, theft, forgery” and “deception” as her financial woes mounted, according to the filing.

Prosecutors alleged she was secretly using a fraudulent power of attorney to execute a \$250,000 line of credit against the home of her husband, who ran a successful stone masonry business and whose house was premarital property, the filing says.

But the Heber City home was the first in her new business venture, according to prosecutors, and the man from whom she bought the house, Val Maynard, said he was thrilled when she offered \$215,000 for it.

Maynard had lived in the house for years, he told “Dateline,” but was ready to sell after his wife died. Maynard knew it needed significant repairs, since there had been “lots of water damage,” he said. But Maynard said he was upfront with Richins about the work it needed, according to the lawsuit.

When Richins first visited the house, Maynard recalled, she seemed friendly and pleasant. She and a man whom Maynard believed to be a work crew foreman appeared unfazed by the home’s deteriorating condition.

“They were not troubled at all about it,” he said.

After the sale, subcontractors began “gutting” the property — even though it didn’t appear that proper permits had been obtained for a complete remodel, according to a general contractor who lives across the street and provided a declaration included in the Wrights’ lawsuit.

A dream house?

The house went on the market in October 2019, and Taryn Wright said it was presented as though it was in “pristine” condition. Maynard said that it looked like it could have been featured on a home makeover show.

“It looked like a magical transformation,” he said.

An inspection found no problems, Taryn Wright said, who said they were told nothing about prior water damage or plumbing and roof issues. The couple bought the house the following January for \$409,000.

“We envisioned having barbecues and hosting and just spending time with family and being able to look out at that beautiful view,” Taryn Wright said.

After the first rain that spring, they noticed a musty smell in the basement, Taryn Wright said.

Moving out

The couple repaired the moldy drywall and replaced windows that had not been properly installed, according to the lawsuit. But the mold reappeared, and a local siding company told them that the roof was their problem: There were holes in it, the sides were rotten and the soffit and fascia boards were falling apart, according to the lawsuit.

In August 2022, as the family was getting sicker and their home seemed to be deteriorating, Taryn Wright said they had the house inspected for mold. “Hazardous” levels of the fungus were discovered in the basement in the inspection, according to the lawsuit, and mold spores had spread throughout the home.

Testing conducted at the home last month found a variety of toxic mold levels that were “bad” but not the worst, said Gianni Rossini, an owner of Envirobiomics, the company that analyzed the samples.

Some samples in the company’s analysis, which the Wrights provided to “Dateline,” showed levels that were a hundredfold higher than normal.

Rossini said the samples don’t measure toxicity, although the more mold there is the more likely it is to potentially affect someone who comes into contact with it.

Christopher Bloom, a spokesman for the National Center for Healthy Housing, a nonprofit that provides assistance for people dealing with mold, said that researchers are still trying to understand how different types of the fungus affect humans.

“As with many allergens, certain molds can affect people in a variety of different ways, depending on the type of mold, the length of

exposure, and a person’s body chemistry,” he said in an email. “To date, the federal government has set no specific standards or made specific recommendations regarding airborne concentrations of mold or spores.”

Last year, after learning of the amount of mold there was in their home, the Wrights immediately evacuated with their three children, moving to a relative’s rental home and leaving their belongings, which they feared had been contaminated, the couple said.

They also said they repeatedly — and unsuccessfully — tried to get a hold of Kouri Richins to determine how best to fix the home.

“We didn’t hear anything from her,” Alec Wright said.



Mold in the home of Alec and Taryn Wright.

Text messages between Richins and a realtor who was working with her at the time, Jessica Klingenberg, show that Richins may have known about the mold before selling the house.

In one message, which Klingenberg sent on Aug. 5, 2019, and provided to “Dateline,” the realtor told her that the bedroom in the basement — the room where the Wrights’ son would later live — was “super moldy.”

A contractor suggested mudding the drywall to kill the fungus and then painting it, Klingenberg said.

"Cheaper and safer for new owners," she wrote.

"I saw!!" Richins replied. "It looks soooo good!! Yes, we will plan to do that! Thank you soooooooooo much!!"

Lawyers for Richins did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Alec Wright described their lawsuit as a last resort. That legal fight, along with the hundreds of thousands of dollars they sunk into their home — and estimates that it would cost more to repair the house than what they paid for it — has left them in a financially precarious position, the couple said.

"If we're not able to find the means to get back into our home," Alec Wright said, "financially, we'll be ruined."

Before Richins was charged with murder, the couple was hopeful their lawsuit would prove successful and they'd recoup some, if not all, of their losses, Taryn Wright said.

Now, their situation seems far different. Their new reality, she said, might be "that we've lost everything."