

“It’s a real thing.”



After almost four years outside, James has a Durham apartment, two settling cats, and a morning routine that no longer starts at a Walmart sink.

TOLD BY JAMES WITH HIS CONSENT TO DAVID NEWCOMB ON JUNE 23, 2026 · STORY REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY JAMES ON JULY 7 2026

Until this June, mornings meant a run to Walmart, to “splash around in the bathroom sink.” Now James gets up in his own Durham apartment and takes a shower. First thing, or later on. Whenever he wants. “Every day is different now,” he says.

The kitchen is new too. There is a fridge and a freezer, so “now shopping is different.” He can buy food that has to stay cold, even in summer. “I used to make shopping lists, lists when I went to the grocery store back in the old days.” He has reason to make them again.



“ [The] final relief off me was when I got the two cats here, I was like, okay, official.”

— JAMES, ON THE MOMENT HOME BECAME OFFICIAL

On a Monday in June, James moved into a place he shares with a close friend (who was also experiencing homelessness prior to this June) and their two cats, Ace and Rad. It is not where he expected to end up. He had been outside almost four years, by his own count. He and his friend used to joke that the woods were where they would stay until they died.

Help had been offered before. David Newcomb, a Street Outreach worker in Durham, has known James for years. A long time back, David asked James if he wanted help. The answer was no. James had watched offers like that go nowhere for other people, and for himself. “Eventually you, you just don’t get return phone call for the next step.” “We’ve had people come by and talk to us real interested, and then never see him again months later.”

This spring the answer changed. Around the middle of May, David told him about a new homelessness system initiative: Housing Sprints. “From the starting this time, you [David] were emphasizing the ease of this,” James says. Not “a bunch of hoops.” No finding out later that he was not “disabled or qualified enough.” What jumped out was “the speed,” and that the program

was not built for one category of person. “It was just like, no, you’re probably fine.” “That was what was reassuring.”

He was still braced for the catch. “I was hopeful because you were selling it positive, but still doubtful,” he says. Then a neighbor he knew got a place through the same initiative. “He’s got a key, he’s in a place.” “They’ve been talking, everybody confident, and it’s actually happening.” Around the same time, David had an apartment to show him. James had figured he would be offered “some old project building” that “hasn’t been torn down yet.” The place he walked through was nothing like that. He said yes.

The process asked little of him. He and the friend with whom he was housed “didn’t really have to do that much to move the process along. It was just kind of easy presented to us.” David and Gabby, another outreach worker, kept coming back to see them. “And it did work just smooth.” Moving in came with help. Cleaning supplies. “Tables and chairs, and little desk lamp,” the kind that turns on at a touch. Ace treats it as a toy. It took a couple of trips to bring both cats from the woods to the apartment. When they arrived, it was official.



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YEARS, ALMOST, THAT JAMES LIVED
OUTSIDE

27

DAYS FROM INTAKE TO MOVE-IN

Ask James what it means that a program like this exists, and he answers as someone who spent years hearing rumors about help that never showed up. “You hear about it, it’s a real thing.” There is “an actual budget” behind it, he says. For anyone still out there who doubts it, his answer is practical. He would hand over David’s phone number.

His one suggestion for the system is the kind you only get from someone who has stood on the other side of it. Program websites, he has noticed, are mostly written for donors and volunteers. “If you’re a homeless person, you just want to find out. Okay, what do you offer? What I do? What’s the hours number?”

The plans from here are plain ones. “Only real goals I have are taking care of the cats, getting fixed up,” he says, and, for himself, “some kind of legitimate income.” Ace “is doing great.” Rad is getting a little more rambunctious, climbing on the bins and blankets James set out. The shopping lists are coming back. The shower is down the hall. “Every day is different now.”

THE INVITATION

James moved in because a Durham landlord said yes, and because flexible help was there for the small things a home starts with: cleaning supplies, tables and chairs, a lamp a cat now plays with. That help is what donations make possible. If you want to take part — a unit to lease, dollars to give, or volunteer time — write to hope@durhamnc.gov. The work is yours as much as anyone's.

BEHIND THIS STORY

- ◆ **Consent** — James's written consent was gathered once, at the outset, before the interview. Additionally, James reviewed and approved the final version of the story on July, 7 2026, prior to any publication. One thing stands permanently: if James ever asks us to take this story down, we will.
- ◆ **The system's part** — The homelessness system consists of many agencies — across non-profit, governmental, educational, healthcare, and business sectors — that work to serve people who are experiencing homelessness. The work reflected in stories of neighbors is always the result of deep collaboration and commitment across partners.
- ◆ **The record** — “Almost four years” outside is James's own accounting, quoted as he told it. The first conversation about the program occurred on May 13, intake was completed on May 20, and move-in was Monday June 16. James had been housed about a week as of the June 23 interview.