

“I feel safe. I feel happy.”



After years of building homes for other people, Wanda has one of her own in Durham.

TOLD BY WANDA · WITH HER CONSENT · AS TOLD TO ANNA GAZMARIAN · OCTOBER 2, 2026

Ask Wanda what she likes about her new apartment, and she'll tell you about the rain.

There's a covered walkway outside her door. On nights she can't sleep, she goes out and sits there. “I go outside, feel the wind, I feel the air.”

It reminds her of her aunt's porch when she was a girl, the grown-ups sitting out with Coca-Colas and peanuts, talking while it rained. She doesn't play music out there. She does crosswords, or watches her granddaughter make art out of cardboard, the way Wanda used to draw. After everything, she says, “I want to be nice, relax, and enjoy people.”



Prayers get answered, she says, through real things and real people.

— WANDA, REFLECTING ON HER JOURNEY

Wanda knows what goes into a home. She spent years building them for other people. Now she's making one her own.

She moved to Durham in 2006 to take care of her aunt. She worked as a painter and remodeler, hanging sheetrock and patching walls, and became a certified supervisor who inspected her crews' work, including on a job at the North Carolina Museum of Art. “People think it's easy,” she says. “It's not easy.” You spread the compound like mud, she says, only thinner, then let it dry and smooth it down.

In those years she had a house, a bank account, and work she was proud of. Then her aunt died, and the house Wanda had cared for was sold.

For the last ten years, she's moved between family, rented rooms, living outside, and shelters. Some shelter days started at 8 a.m. and ended at curfew, so she spent the hours in between at the library, making friends, the way she does everywhere she goes.

In August, she was brought into a Housing Sprint—a few intensive weeks when outreach workers, case managers, housing locators, and flexible funds all work with the same small group of people at once, on a deadline.

She moved into her studio on September 18. It's one room with a TV, a bed, a kitchen with the sink and stove built in together, the bathroom door by the mirror. She remembers what the team told her that day: "We here to help you."



Some things about Wanda held through all those years. She cooks for her neighbors on a microwave and an air fryer while she waits for an oven, so she can make her daughter's favorite fried chicken. Every night she helps an 85-year-old neighbor with his eye drops. She knows whose cat is whose and where it's gotten to. "Everybody needs somebody to talk to," she says.

Her grandkids come over to play Uno and watch PAW Patrol. She and one grandson planted cucumber and pepper seeds in pots by the window, and she tends them between his visits. One cucumber plant bloomed yellow by the air conditioner, and the grandkids laugh at the way it blows around. She's planning a wall of Dollar Tree frames, one for each grandbaby, labeled with names and birthdays so she never misses one. One of them was born on Wanda's birthday.

She talks about faith in God and in people. Prayers get answered, she says, through real things and real people. She has faith in the ones who helped her get here, and she's become someone other people lean on.

She has a plan. First, about 20 hours of work a week, painting if she can. Then, someday, a small house with a yard, somewhere the grandkids can come and stay. Something like her aunt's place, the house that first brought her to Durham. She already knows the walls will be white, semi-gloss. And it'll have a porch, for the rain.

"I feel safe," she says. "I feel happy."

THE INVITATION

A home doesn't come together all at once, and stability takes more than a move-in date. Wanda's housing took a landlord, an outreach team, a case manager, and a fund that could move fast. Keeping it takes longer still: a year of case management to help her find work and stay housed, and the small things that make a place livable. Most of her belongings are in storage, with no way to get them. When a friend bought her a small table and two chairs, she couldn't find the words to say thank you.

If you own or manage property, we need units. If you can give, the flexible housing fund turns a landlord's yes into a set of keys. If you can open a door in your network, we'd like your help. Write to hope@durhamnc.gov.

BEHIND THIS STORY

- ◆ **Consent** — Wanda gave written consent before her interview, chose how she would be named, and reviewed and approved this story. If she ever asks us to take it down, we will.
- ◆ **A first conversation** — This portrait comes from our first conversation with Wanda, two weeks after she moved in. With her permission, we'll check back in six months to hear what has held and what has been hard.
- ◆ **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.
- ◆ **Wanda's specific sprint** — Wanda was housed through Durham's August–September Housing Sprint for unsheltered adults, which ran alongside a sprint for families and has housed more than 30 neighbors so far. She is one of the roughly 400 unsheltered neighbors Durham aims to house this year. Her move-in came together through the Community Safety Department, HOM Inc., and Family Promise of the Triangle.