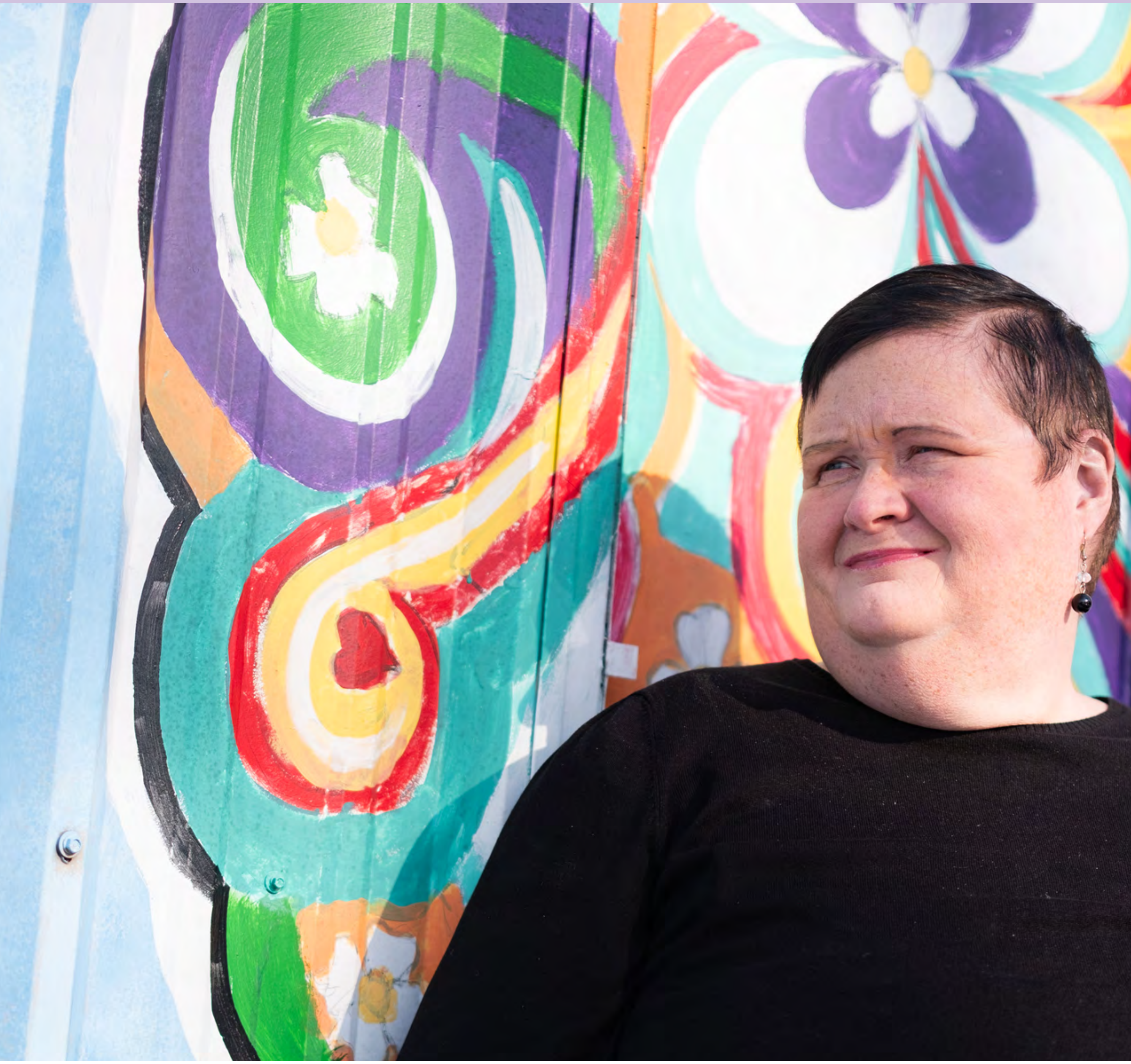
TENNESSEE KINDRED STORIES OF DISABILITY 2026

Housing Opportunities and Barriers in Tennessee Communities



AbleVoices

VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER

The Arc Tennessee

Table of Contents

Introduction

Finding and keeping a safe, stable, and affordable home is one of the most significant challenges facing adults with disabilities today. Across Tennessee, people with disabilities and their families describe housing not simply as a physical structure, but as the foundation for autonomy, dignity, emotional wellbeing, and community belonging. Yet too often, the opportunities available to them fall short of what they need.

This booklet brings together stories that illuminate those realities. They come from adults with disabilities, their families, and community members whose experiences reveal a complex picture shaped by both possibility and limitation.

The stories collected here help us understand barriers that are both practical and systemic. There is a shortage of affordable and accessible homes, declining housing quality, strict eligibility criteria, discrimination, lack of landlord accountability, and slow or confusing service systems. These issues are not abstract; they shape daily life. They affect the ability to access work, to maintain health, to stay connected to community, and to plan for the future.

The stories here reflect a widespread need in our state. In 2024, the Tennessee Developmental Disabilities Network conducted a joint needs assessment to identify unmet needs, service gaps, and barriers experienced by people with disabilities, their families, and professionals in the field. Housing was among the top five identified priority areas. The full report may be viewed here: vkc.vumc.org/community-needs-survey.

As you read these stories, we invite you to reflect on the voices of people navigating long waitlists, advocating for themselves in inaccessible systems, building lives in housing that doesn't yet meet their needs, and imagining homes that support independence and connection. Their experiences call us to action.

> ACROSS TENNESSEE, PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR FAMILIES DESCRIBE HOUSING NOT SIMPLY AS A PHYSICAL STRUCTURE, BUT AS THE FOUNDATION FOR AUTONOMY, DIGNITY, EMOTIONAL WELLBEING, AND COMMUNITY BELONGING.

Sarah

I am a parent of two adult sons in their 30s, and both are on the autism spectrum. My oldest son also has significant mental health challenges, including schizophrenia. Over the last year, we have faced many challenges trying to find housing and support for him.

After a mental health crisis last year, my oldest son was briefly jailed. During his court hearings, the judge recommended that he be placed in a group housing setting. However, finding a type of group housing that would meet his needs and the court's expectations turned out to be almost impossible. We were able to secure temporary housing for a short time, but after another hospitalization and therapy stay, he was discharged with nowhere to go. The only alternative was for him to live at home.

I work as a companion for adults with disabilities, so I see firsthand the challenges families face when trying to access resources—not only with my own sons but also with the individuals I work with. It's very difficult for parents to find clear, organized information about housing options or service providers.

Both of my sons currently live at home with my husband and me. My husband is retired and stays with them full time while I work. We decided this was the best short-term arrangement for now, mainly because there simply aren't appropriate housing options for them in our area. I've never believed in the idea of saying, "You're 18, you're on your own," especially for a child with disabilities whose needs continue throughout their life.

Finding suitable housing, transportation, and services is extremely challenging, particularly for parents who are still working. In many other states, families have social workers who remain involved from childhood through adulthood, helping coordinate care and transitions. In Tennessee, however, families are largely left to manage everything on their own once their children age out of the school system. Hospital social workers may offer some temporary guidance after a hospitalization, but that support ends abruptly upon discharge, even though the ongoing needs remain.

My sons like living with people they know and trust, but like anyone their age, they also want independence. Unfortunately, the network of support they would need just doesn't exist right now. For a short period, my oldest son lived in a residential program in another part of the state, but it was too far away for my husband and me to visit regularly.

My oldest son has always loved trains and would ideally like to live near a train museum, where he could volunteer or work. In an ideal world, he would have his own place, with space for his interests and the right level of support. He doesn't need full-time care, but he does need daily support systems in place, similar to how senior living facilities provide varying levels of assistance depending on the person's needs.

To me, community living means having a range of choices that fit each person's level of independence and support needs. Unfortunately, in Tennessee, those choices are still very limited for people with disabilities. Families need easier access to information and more reliable, lifelong support to help them navigate these options. Families like mine are doing everything we can, but we need better structure and stronger support to help our children build meaningful, independent lives in their communities. ■

Cynthia

I am the mother of a 23-year-old daughter who is on the autism spectrum and has an intellectual and developmental disability. She was diagnosed just before her third birthday, and since then, our lives have revolved around trying to understand her needs and give her the best life possible. She aged out of the school system in May, and ever since, we've been trying to find housing and supports that actually work for her. It feels like an endless maze, and most days, I don't know where to turn next.

My daughter speaks in short phrases, usually two or three words at a time. She can tell me what she wants or needs, but she can't have a back-and-forth conversation. When she can't express herself, she gets frustrated, and that frustration can turn into aggression toward herself or others, or sometimes into breaking things around her. Those moments are hard because I know she isn't doing it on purpose. Now that she's out of school, she's home most of the time and very isolated. There are hardly any programs willing to take someone who can be physically aggressive. She has great work skills and so much potential, but we can't find a job coach or agency willing to take the risk.

She still lives at home with me, my husband, and our son. Life at home is intense. I'm always on edge, trying to anticipate her triggers and make sure she and everyone around her are safe. I feel like I'm constantly guessing what she needs. Even though she's an adult, she depends on me for everything, and that takes a toll. The isolation is heavy, too. Because her disability isn't visible, people don't understand. When she has behaviors, others pull away. Sometimes, even I have to take a step back for my own safety, and that hurts deeply. It's a painful thing to feel distance from your own child.

When we talk about her future, she says she wants to stay home for now and eventually live in a house with roommates and support. That's what I want for her, too, but finding housing that truly meets her needs has been nearly impossible. There's a serious shortage of direct support professionals, and the few who are available often don't have the training or confidence to work with someone like my daughter. Many agencies say no as soon as they see her behavior plan. Others agree to try but back out once they realize the severity of her behavior.

The options that do exist are not right for her. The intermediate care facilities are too medical. Most residents there can't walk or talk much, and my daughter would have no peers to connect with. The community living programs sound good in theory, but the staff turnover is constant. Every time someone new comes in, she has to start over with them, and they have to start over with her. That instability usually leads to more behaviors. On top of that, it is my understanding that staff aren't allowed to stop residents from leaving the home. My daughter has no sense of safety. She could walk out the front door and get lost, be arrested, or worse, and no one would be allowed to stop her. The thought of that terrifies me.

Right now, housing options for my daughter simply do not exist. Agencies are short-staffed, undertrained, and stretched thin. The few that try to help often don't have the backup or resources they need. We need more than one option. We need safe, structured homes for those who need extra support and community-based homes for those who can manage them. Until that happens, families like mine are stuck, trying to balance giving our children independence with the fear of what might happen if we do. ■

Elysia

My name is Elysia, and I am 46 years old. I live in Tennessee. I received my bachelor's degree from the University of Tennessee at Martin and my master's degrees from both Murray State University and the University of Tennessee at Martin. I lived with my father until my early 30s and moved out in 2014.

I have multiple disabilities that affect both my mobility and my ability to manage daily tasks. My biggest goal right now is to live somewhere that gives me independence without isolation. I want a place where I can have my own space but still get the support I need. This goal is increasingly important in my life as I continue to face new and persistent challenges.

I have autism spectrum disorder, which affects my communication, ability to follow tasks, and how I interpret information. This means that my communication is affected, and people cannot always understand my needs. I am also very sensitive to noise. I live with arthritis, which affects my mobility and makes it impossible for me to use the stairs. Because of these challenges, I need accessibility features like ramps, elevators, and single-level layouts. These are essential for me to live independently and safely.

I currently live alone in a two-bedroom apartment. This apartment has accessibility features that I need and costs $874 a month. This is the most I can afford given my income. I currently work for a local food delivery company.

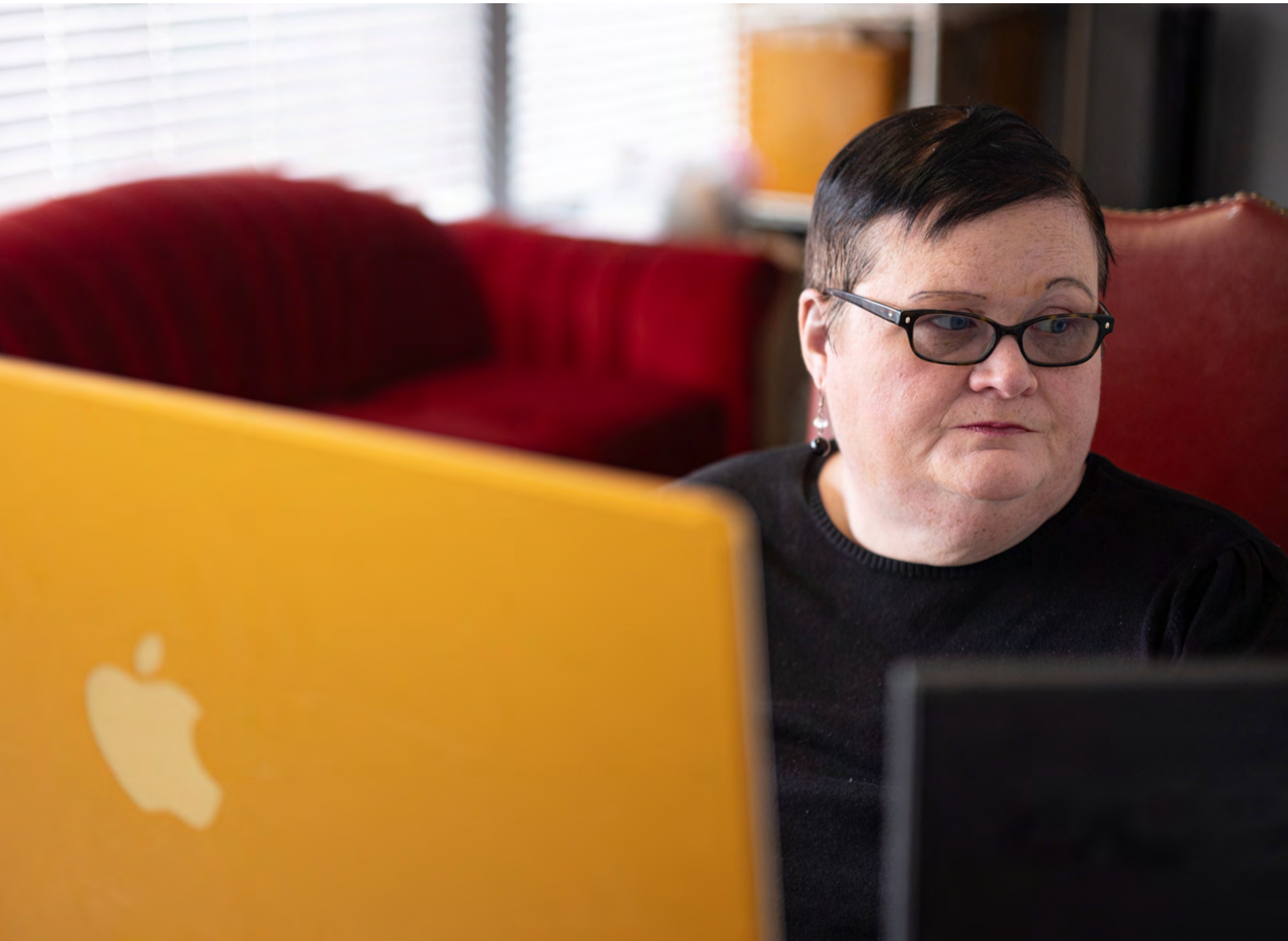
While my apartment is good in many ways, it has failed to meet my needs multiple times. I have pest control issues and extremely loud neighbors living above me. Even after I explained that noise sensitivity is part of my disability, management told me that there was nothing they could do to address the situation.

Despite the issues, I had to renew my lease again this year. Affordable housing in my area is limited, and I couldn't find anything else in my price range. I am trying to relocate closer to my job, but the lack of affordable housing makes that impossible.

Living alone still gives me freedom, and I do appreciate that. The pressure of bills, rent, and fear of losing my independent home scares me.

I have learned that community living should be about safety and finding people you can get along with who respect your shared spaces. These days, it feels like it's getting harder to trust the people around me and the systems that I need to support me. I hope for safe, accessible, and affordable housing where I am protected as a tenant. Independence is essential for people with disabilities, like me. We need housing options that allow us to be independent and thrive in our communities. ■

> “I WANT A PLACE WHERE I CAN HAVE MY OWN SPACE BUT STILL GET THE SUPPORT I NEED.”



Katrina

I am 40 years old, and I've lived in Tennessee for as long as I can remember. I have what they call pervasive developmental disorder, which is a part of the autism spectrum. I had a late diagnosis when I was in my mid- to late 20s. Therefore, it's been a struggle trying to find resources for older adults or adults who have had a late diagnosis.

My disability includes difficulties with social interaction and communication. I live on my own in an inclusive living community called Our Place Nashville. It provides housing for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. There are also some residents who live here that do not have disabilities but are students in college. I learned about Our Place Nashville through an expo with Autism Tennessee where I was able to find other resources and information about services that help adults with disabilities, and Our Place Nashville happened to be there.

> "I THINK WHAT MAKES GOOD COMMUNITY LIVING IS INDEPENDENCE AND PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY LIFE WITH SUPPORT SERVICES FOR THOSE WHO NEED THEM."

I have been in and out of my parents' household throughout my adult life, but I've lived at Our Place Nashville since May 2024. I like that Our Place Nashville offers community classes that teach life skills and other fun skills, such as students from Belmont teaching guitar lessons, and Vanderbilt dietetic interns teaching cooking lessons. It's nice that I can get to know adults that have similar disabilities as me and other adults with different disabilities as well. I also enjoy that I do not have a roommate, but I do have housemates.

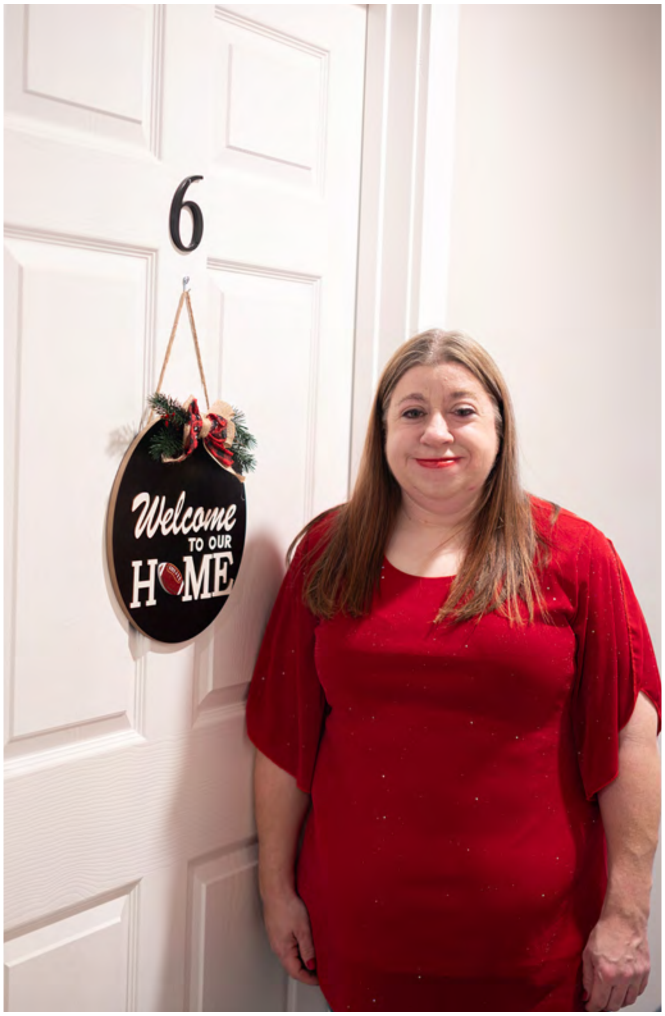
I think the most challenging thing for me is getting along with housemates. We have a shared living room and kitchen, so sometimes we argue about things like dishes or the TV being too loud. Ideally, I would like to have more of an actual apartment, like maybe a studio style or one bedroom, where I have my own living room and kitchen areas, and I don't have to share that space with other adults.

One of the struggles I've been facing is engaging with adults outside of my house, in the community. I would like to have more opportunities to engage with other adults with autism and explore Nashville. I've looked into alternative options for places to live, but there's not a lot. It can be surprising too, because places will say they are affordable but then it turns out it's not affordable for adults with disabilities like me. Adults with disabilities have enough struggles without having to search hard to find affordable housing.

Another issue is finding somewhere where it's safe, and there's not a lot of crime going on. That's where a lot of people are having issues. They finally find somewhere to stay after looking for a while, and then there's a bunch of crime.

I think what makes good community living is independence and participation in community life with support services for those who need them. I also think that a good community is close to bus stops, shopping centers, and restaurants. It would be nice for a place for the residents to be able to work out without having to pay a monthly fee for a gym membership. Most adults with disabilities aren't able to afford much after they pay rent or other bills.

If I could change one thing about access to community living for adults with disabilities, it would be having more housing opportunities. Not just in the Nashville area but also in other major cities in Tennessee. I think that lawmakers can change this by creating policies that make housing more affordable for disabled people, whether it be a physical disability or an intellectual and developmental disability.



I really wish lawmakers in power could understand the huge financial barrier we face and figure out a way to make housing more affordable for people like me. ■

Rhonda & Zak

My name is Rhonda, and I am a mom of two children. I worked as a registered nurse for over 40 years, and now I am retired. My youngest, Zak, is 32 years old and is on the autism spectrum. Zak was born and raised in Tennessee and has been living independently for many years. Well, independently except for his two basset hounds who keep him company!

Zak is a smart, kind, detail-oriented man who loves to express himself through his many tattoos and impressively long beard. In his free time, Zak likes hanging out with his sister and watching YouTube. Being able to participate meaningfully in his community has been a consistent priority for him. Zak works on the assembly line at a local factory which he really enjoys. Unfortunately, a few months ago Zak sustained an injury to his left shoulder that has taken him away from his regular routines, including his job.

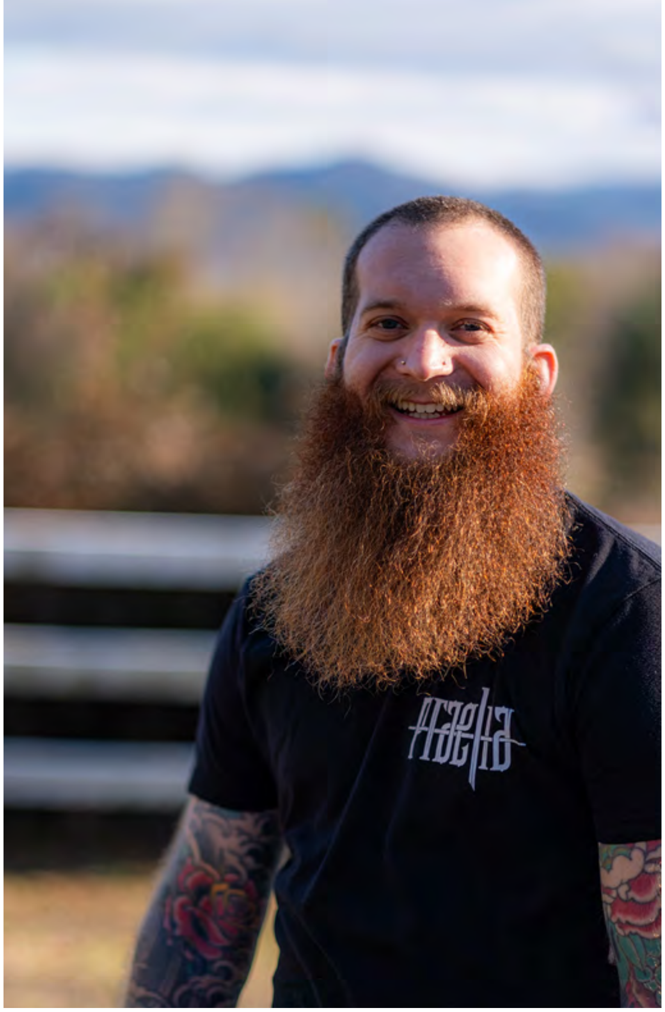
> “DESPITE OUR EXTENSIVE RESEARCH, WE HAVE HAD TROUBLE FINDING RESOURCES AND ORGANIZATIONS TO SUPPORT ZAK IN THESE ASPECTS OF HOME OWNERSHIP.”

For the past four years, Zak has been living alone in his childhood home. We tried other living arrangements, including apartments and living with me, but ultimately decided together that the house was the best fit for him. This house is his lifetime estate, and he enjoys the familiarity. Zak loves the location because he lives 10 minutes away from his sister and me, which is just enough space for him to both exercise his independence and see his family when he wants to. He loves living off the main road and gets the opportunity to regularly see two of his uncles who live nearby. The estate is about 6 acres, which means Zak gets to keep busy mowing and weeding on the property.

While Zak is mostly content with his current living situation, the house is 26 years old. It requires a number of repairs to the roofing, flooring, and bathrooms. Delayed repairs have presented safety hazards for Zak, such as recent issues with black mold. Zak also sometimes feels embarrassed to have company over because of the work that needs to be done, which contributes to feelings of social isolation. He sometimes struggles to differentiate between what is working the way it should be and what is not. There are a lot of intricate details involved with being a homeowner that are tricky to navigate without additional support. Despite our extensive research, we have had trouble finding resources and organizations to support Zak in these aspects of home ownership.

On top of this, Zak was recently removed from both the Employment and Community First CHOICES (ECF CHOICES) waiver program and TennCare because he acquired a job and earns too much to meet the financial criteria. While he loves his job at John Deere and achieved his goal of employment, he still needs support from other aspects of these programs, such as budgeting and opportunities for socialization. Though he makes some money, Zak struggles to budget consistently. He would benefit significantly from support from programs such as ECF CHOICES to provide additional education on home ownership responsibilities. Additionally, he hasn't had steady income since his injury.

Every program we have explored for financial assistance with home repairs and modifications has, again, been based on income and financial resources. These state services are crucial to provide Zak with the means to make home repairs, pay medical bills, and put food on the table. He's been trying to save up to buy a truck but unfortunately has to use every dollar he makes on other, more essential things, such as clearing mold or paying for contractors. I'm worried I will have to take out loans just to help him pay for what he needs. I am on a limited income due to my recent retirement and disability, so this will add a lot of stress to my plate that could have been prevented.



Policymakers need to know that while programs like ECF CHOICES have potential, the way they operate really needs to be revised. As they are right now, eligibility for these programs is based on a qualifying income. These programs do not take into account the multi-faceted challenges to independent living for folks with intellectual or developmental disabilities. ■

Kelli & Samantha

My name is Kelli, and I've lived in Tennessee since 1978. I grew up in East Tennessee, met my husband at Middle Tennessee State University, and we eventually settled in the Nashville area so he could work in the music industry. Tennessee has been our home for decades. But the older I get, the more I realize how fragile "home" can feel when you have an adult daughter with significant disabilities, and nowhere appropriate for her to live if something ever happened to us.

My oldest daughter, Samantha, is 36 years old. She was born at just 27 weeks, and her early arrival created what I often refer to as the "perfect storm." She has quadriplegic cerebral palsy, and every part of her body is affected. Functionally, she is nonverbal, though at home we've built our own language: five spoken words, countless expressions, and a lifetime of understanding each other without complete sentences.

Samantha requires total care. She cannot sit up, move independently, feed herself, or use the bathroom. She relies entirely on my hands and her father's hands. Her wheelchair is her mobility, and our strength is her freedom. And as much as we genuinely love caring for her, no one will ever love her the way we do, but love doesn't stop bodies from aging. I already struggle with tendonitis from lifting and transferring her, and my husband battles elbow pain from the same repetitive motions. Now that we're in our 60s, the math of caregiving is becoming impossible to ignore.

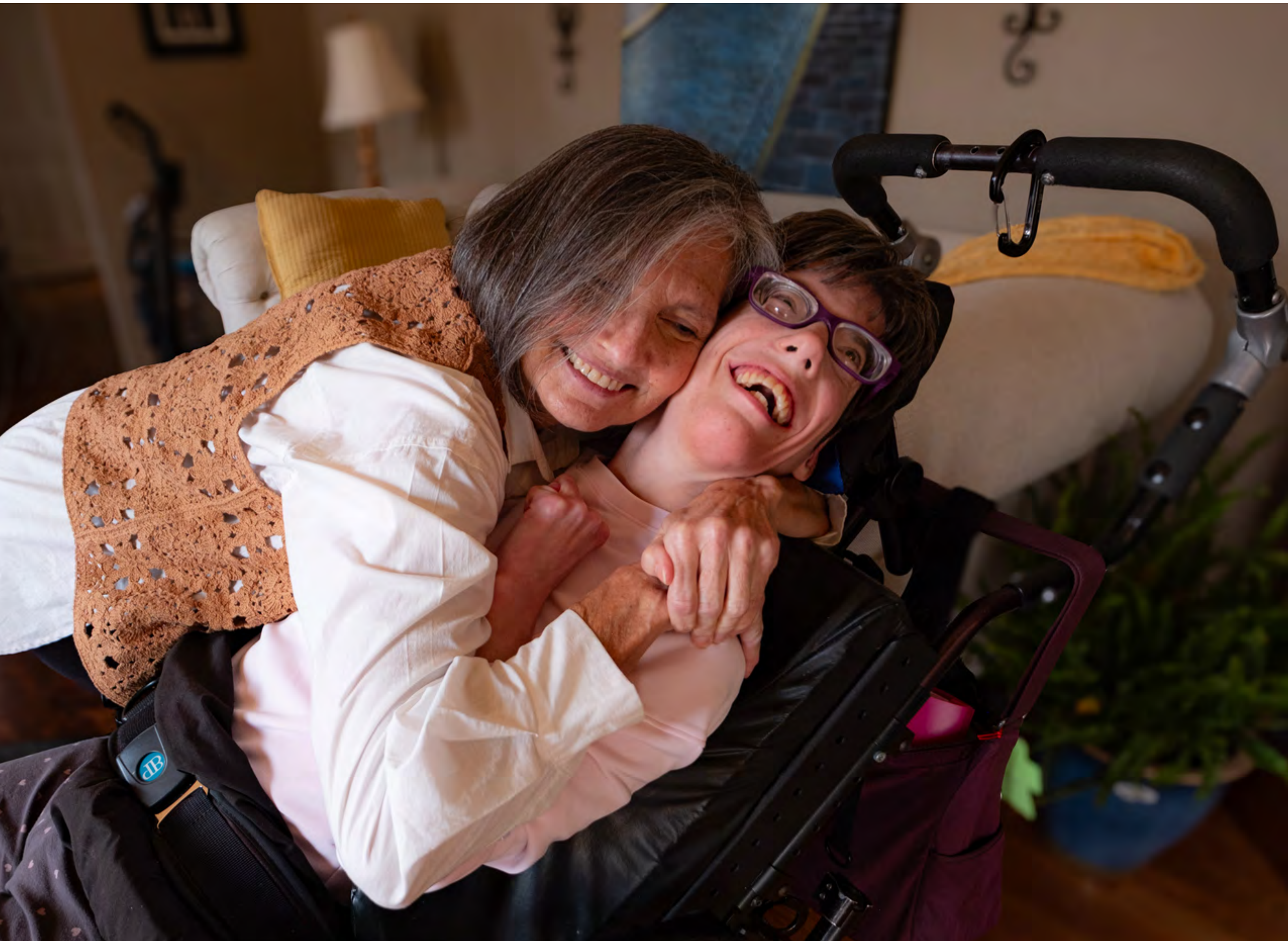
Living at home works for her only because we've spent years reshaping it around her needs. We live on one level to avoid stairs, and we added a large roll-in shower years ago to make bathing feasible. Beyond that, there are very few adaptations. Her entire day depends on us: waking, bathing, dressing, feeding, transferring from bed to wheelchair, from wheelchair to shower chair, and from wheelchair to couch. Everything she does happens through our bodies.

And yet, Samantha's life is complete. She attends an adult day program called WAVES through TennCare's Employment and Community First CHOICES (ECF CHOICES) waiver program. She participates in music therapy, interacts with her peers, and follows routines that keep her mind engaged and active. Every Sunday, she attends church, participating in a disability ministry with peers and volunteers who know her deeply.

Every Saturday, her father takes her on their long-standing “shopping date” to the mall. This past year, she joined an inclusive dance class where participants moved their wheelchairs to the rhythm. And each summer, she spends a week at an Easter Seals camp in Alabama doing things many would never expect, such as zip-lining, tubing behind a boat, and staying away from home overnight. She truly thrives in community settings and environments that value her.

But when it comes to housing, everything becomes complicated. Because she cannot have in-depth conversations and primarily communicates through yes/no responses, we must interpret her wishes through her behavior. And based on how she flourishes at camp, church, and her day program, I am confident that she would do well in a shared living arrangement with peers, surrounded by a community, stimulation, and opportunities that we cannot replicate at home.

The problem is that in Tennessee, there is no appropriate place for her to live.



We have researched every option. The community homes connected to WAVES cannot meet Samantha's level of need. She cannot walk or sit up independently. She cannot respond quickly in an emergency. She would need 24/7 staff trained to safely lift and transfer her, as well as a home equipped explicitly for someone with her mobility needs. Those homes are not built for that. Most community-based homes in Tennessee are designed for individuals with much higher levels of independence.

> “NOW WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE QUESTION ISN'T WHETHER SHE WILL ONE DAY LIVE SOMEWHERE ELSE, IT'S WHERE SHE CAN LIVE SAFELY, JOYFULLY, AND WITH DIGNITY.”

The harshest truth is this: If my husband and I died tomorrow, Samantha would be placed in a nursing home. A nursing home for a 36-year-old woman who loves dance classes, music therapy, church, mall trips, and summer camp. A nursing home, not because it is the most suitable option, but because it is the only option the state currently offers for someone who requires extensive physical support but not medical care. That possibility keeps me awake at night.

When we were younger, I believed that no one else could care for Samantha the way we could. But aging has changed that perspective. Now we understand that the question isn't *whether* she will one day live somewhere else, it's *where* she can live safely, joyfully, and with dignity.

I'm not asking for institutions. We've seen the harm they have caused. But she also cannot live “independently.” What she needs is a middle ground: a community-based, age-appropriate residence with 24/7 staff, meaningful programming, safety oversight, and genuine social engagement. A place that recognizes who she is: an adult woman with humor, preferences, friendships, and interests, not a nursing home patient.

What I want policymakers to understand is simple: There must be options.

There must be more than one path. More choices for different levels of support. More living arrangements that reflect an adult's age, personality, and dignity. More ways to make sure families like mine are not living with the constant fear that their child will be institutionalized because Tennessee has nowhere else for them to go. ■

Greyson

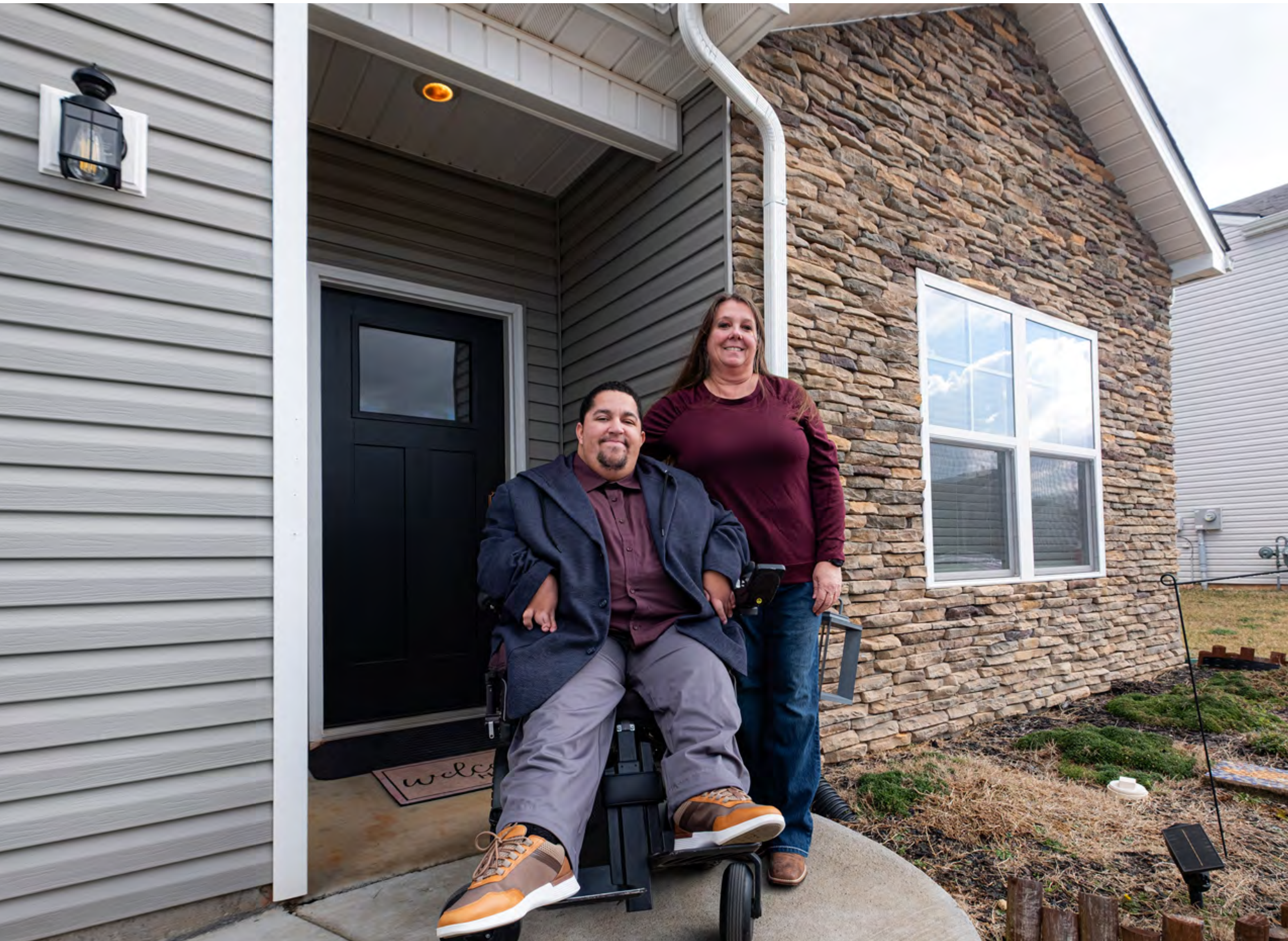
My name is Greyson. I am 29 years old and have lived in Tennessee all my life. Arthrogryposis has shaped my world from birth, influencing how I move and how I interact with it. The condition affects each of my joints, limiting motion throughout my body. I use an electric wheelchair and receive daily assistance for activities that require physical movement.

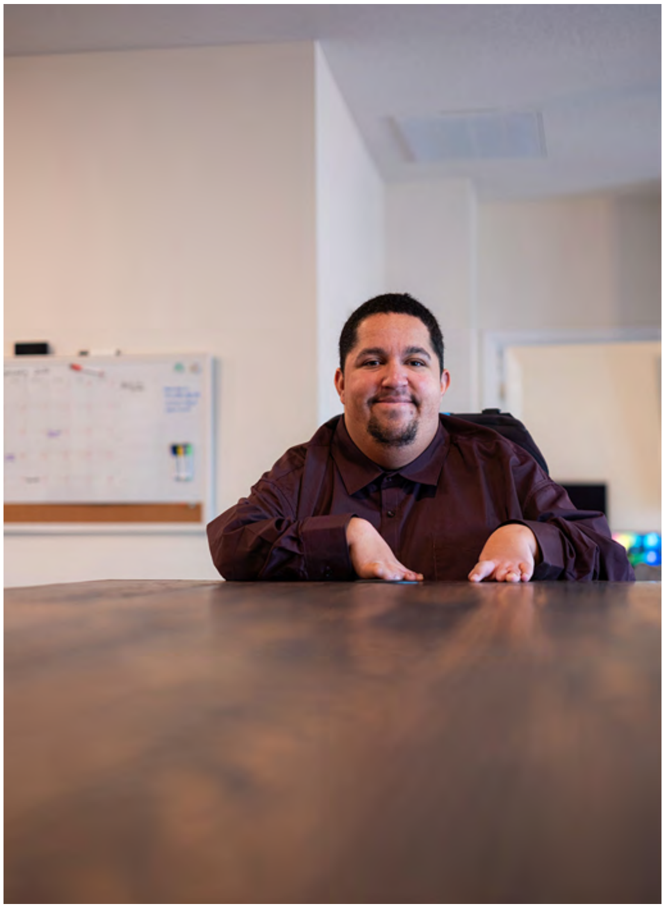
My mother passed away in 2007. My father later remarried, and his former wife, Amy, is now my primary caregiver and the person I share my home with. Arthrogryposis presents differently for everyone. In my case, the condition extends across most of my limbs, which means physical support is necessary for certain tasks. Even so, I maintain full independence in the areas that define my daily life. Living in the community depends on reliable caregiving, and that stability often determines how much freedom someone truly has.

> “I THINK DEFINING COMMUNITY LIVING IS SETTING SOMEONE UP TO LIVE IN AN AREA OF THEIR CHOICE, WHILE ALSO PROVIDING THEM WITH ADEQUATE SUPPORT TO LIVE THERE LONG TERM.”

I attended college at East Tennessee State University (ETSU) where I lived on campus and advocated for the necessary accommodations. I went to the housing department and discussed my needs and got placed in one of the nicer units on campus that was an accessible room with a roll-in shower. One of my really good friends since second or third grade, Peyton, was also going to ETSU at the same time as I was. He became my roommate after I had reached out to strangers to be my roommate, but unfortunately, that first individual didn’t work out. Thankfully, Peyton was able to step in and was able to get paid from Vocational Rehabilitation to be paid as a personal care assistant (PCA). We ended up living together for all four years, and I was able to stay on campus and have him as my PCA. I am very fortunate. You really have to be strong in your self-determination, advocate, list what you need, not give up, and really make it happen for yourself.

This past June marked an important moment for me. After more than a year of searching, I purchased my first home in northeast Tennessee. The process demanded patience and persistence. Accessible housing rarely appears on the market, and many available homes require costly modifications. A step-free entrance, wide doorways, open floor plans, and a roll-in shower were all on my list. Very few properties met those standards, particularly in older neighborhoods. I consider myself very lucky. The home I purchased had previously belonged to another wheelchair user, and they had stated that they wanted this home to go to someone who was in a similar situation. Many of the features I needed were already in place, which spared me the cost of major renovations. The experience reminded me how uncommon it is to find accessible housing ready for immediate use. I recognize the good fortune involved and value it deeply.





The best thing about living in your own home is the freedom and independence it offers. I can have people over to my place anytime I want. I have also been able to build my community and maintain many of my college friendships with friends who still live locally, and being able to catch up with them and hang out on our own terms has been really cool.

Although the house supports my independence physically, another challenge remains. Across Tennessee, there is a shortage of personal care assistants and direct support professionals. Amy provides my care full time because there are very few workers available in the community. Reliable caregiving should not rely on family structure or happenstance. It should be a stable, respected part of the support system that allows individuals like me to live fully.

The hard truth is, if you want to work you lose benefits, and if you want a house, you have to have a job. So, it's one barrier after another to get needs met. One thing I would love to change is the, you know, buy-in program to TennCare. I know that's what we're working toward, so it's vital that individuals with disabilities who need this type of care can and should get it. I honestly think it's a human right.

There is a need for direct support professionals, but the incentives aren't there. I think with adequate policy and funding, it would definitely change my situation. I think the biggest thing is the need for more levels of care. That way, my mom wouldn't have to do it. I mean, she doesn't want to do it all her life, I'm sure, but I know she isn't going to tell me "no," and I am very fortunate for that.

I think defining community living is setting someone up to live in an area of their choice, while also providing them with adequate support to live there long term. That is something that is overlooked. A lot of times they just want to put individuals in a facility or Section 8 housing, (a federal initiative that helps low-income families, the elderly, and people with disabilities afford safe housing in the private market by providing rent subsidies to landlords) without asking whether it is adequate to their specific needs. So, it has to be person-centered, and community living should be more affordable. ■

Leisa & Grace

My name is Leisa. I've lived in Tennessee for more than three decades. I'm the single mother of a 31-year-old daughter, Grace, who has autism, intellectual disabilities, ADHD, and severe speech/language disorder.

Grace is an accomplished artist whose ability was discovered and nurtured since age 4. Today, her art is sold in galleries, various venues, and to corporations across North America. She's been commissioned for exhibits and also for products, such as Christmas ornaments and stationery. In addition, she enjoys horseback riding, dancing, and bowling.

While Grace is accustomed to spending time with her dad and myself in separate houses, I've planned since she was 5 for the day that she would live independent of us in preparation for the day that we are no longer living. My choice of a housing model is Our Place Nashville (OPN). A nonprofit, Our Place integrates individuals with and without disabilities.

Research indicates that individuals with intellectual disabilities best transition from their parents by age 32. While Grace has been at the top of OPN's waitlist for many years, the timing, housing locations, and her maturity haven't aligned for her to move there. While Grace is 31 chronologically, her range of development and capability ranges greatly—from her limited ability to communicate, to be independent, to care for herself, to be safe, and protected. Her father and I have been *intensively* parenting for 31 years.

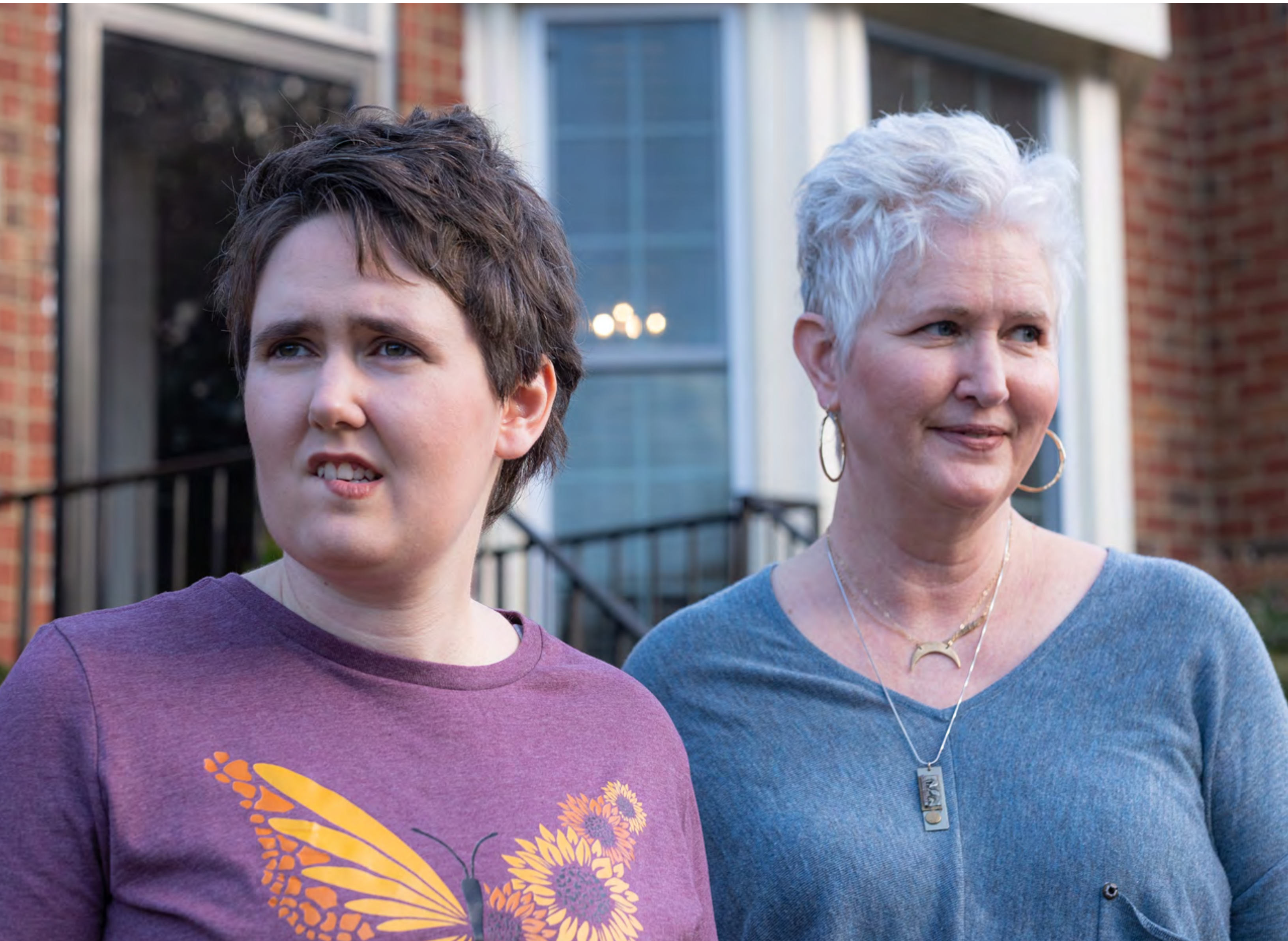
The most common option for Medicaid waiver recipients to live apart from their parents are group homes. However, often the wages paid caregivers receive creates a revolving-door effect for employee retention. Low wages often equals inadequate training and lack of understanding of the disabilities of the people these paid caregivers support. The individuals in their care suffer the consequences of their support workers not making living wages.

This leaves me with the family home model option for Grace. In this model, another family is trained and paid to take care of Grace as we all continue to age and ensure that we all also thrive. We will see Grace weekly and continue to spend holidays with her. I'm convinced that moving Grace from her home is progressive, even, as well as prudent and preventive for her mental, emotional, and physical health and especially that of her aging parents. The 10 years since Grace graduated from public

“WE NEED CITY AND STATE ‘BUY-IN’ TO THE CONCEPT—MADE REALITY—OF AFFORDABLE, LIVING OPTIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES SO THAT COMMUNITY TRULY MEANS ALL.”

school special education services have been beyond demanding of me to manage the multiple, complex state and federal service systems. Two years ago, I experienced what a psychologist I saw labeled as true burnout.

I believe that in another 10 years Grace will have matured enough to be better integrated into a more inclusive program, such as OPN. I raised my daughter according to “researched, evidence-based best practices” to be educated, work, live, play in an inclusive community. At this juncture, I would wholeheartedly repeat that choice. However, I also see that society still fails at meeting her needs. We need city and state “buy-in” to the concept—made reality—of affordable, living options for people with disabilities so that community truly means ALL. ■



Steven

My name is Steven, and I am a 39-year-old Nashville resident who has lived in Tennessee since 1992, when my mom was offered a job here. I am a high-functioning individual, and my family raised me to be independent. I had several learning experiences at centers such as Sylvan Learning where I was given the opportunity to develop different strategies to become a better reader. I continued my education at various schools and graduated from Next Steps at Vanderbilt, an inclusive higher education program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

I live in Nashville at a place called Our Place Nashville. Our Place is a housing community that integrates people with and without disabilities. I moved there when it first opened in 2015, making me one of the first residents. I found the community after the program director contacted my father. We met with the co-founders and decided it was a good fit, and I've now lived there for almost 10 years. Our Place consists of six houses around Nashville with more in the works. I live in a house with six members in total, where I have my own room for a low rent of $325. Residents share common spaces, including a kitchen and a TV room, and participate in community activities like Thursday night meals and movie nights. About half of the residents at Our House are adults with disabilities, and the other half do not have disabilities.

> "I BELIEVE THE BEST PART OF LIVING AT OUR PLACE IS THE FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY IT GIVES ME."

I believe the best part of living at Our Place is the freedom and autonomy it gives me. I enjoy having my own space and the ability to manage my own life, appointments, and hobbies, which include fishing, music, songwriting, and going out to dance. Of course, I have also encountered challenges during my time in group living. I feel the community is not as cohesive as it was when it started with only two houses, and now there is "drama" between some residents from different houses.

I consider my housemates my friends and I enjoy socializing with them. We often go out together for fountain drinks at a local Shell gas station, visit pubs, and watch movies. While I value these relationships, I admit that, as with any shared living situation, people can sometimes be difficult. Beyond spending time with my immediate housemates, I stay engaged by volunteering with several nonprofits, including GiGi's Playhouse, where I help with their teen and adult programs. I deeply value the experience of giving back to the greater Nashville community.

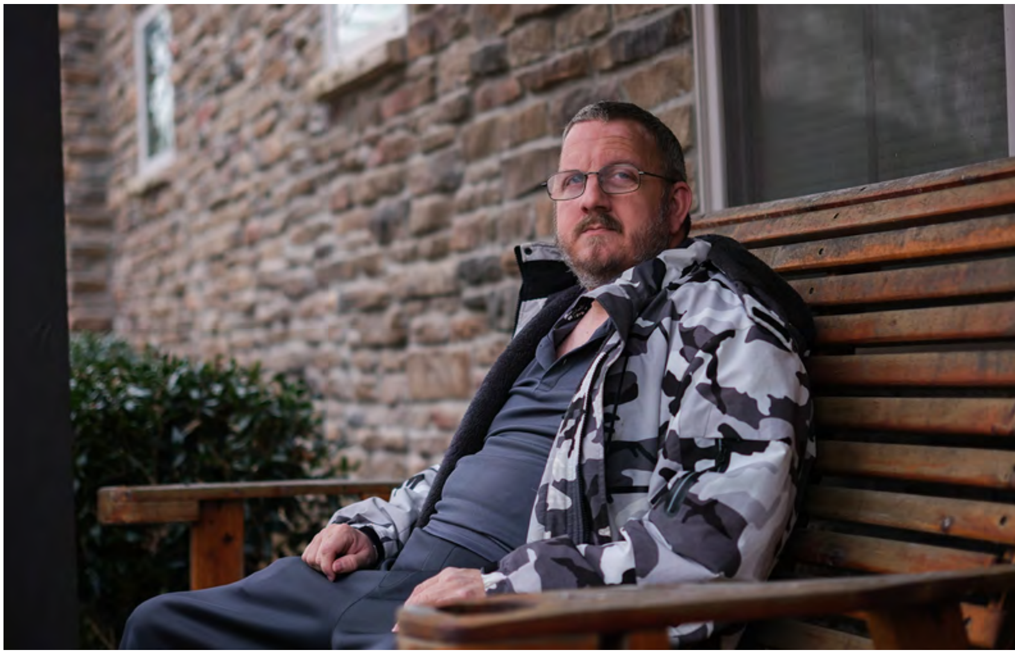
Growing up, I imagined I would one day live in my own house and potentially start a family. In many ways, my current living situation at Our Place fulfills these goals. I enjoy the freedom and independence it allows me. I do not, however, enjoy the additional program fees. In addition to rent, we pay an additional Our Place Nashville fee.

I have considered changing my housing, but it's difficult to give it proper thought, as I am very busy with work, volunteering, and occasionally traveling to Alabama to visit my family. Now that the U.S. Navy has raised its age limit, I am also considering enlisting.

I have enjoyed the chance to live in Our Place, but I crave stronger connections. I define community living as fellowship, and people supporting one another and creating an opportunity for everyone to belong. I wish people understood how important it is for everyone — regardless of disability status — to have a chance for independence but also support at the same time. I can take care of myself, but it is also nice to know that people care about me, and I'm not alone.

There are a few main areas I would change in community living. First, I would like to make public transit more readily accessible. I believe Nashville should subsidize public transportation for adults with disabilities, so they can independently get across the city without worrying about cumbersome fees. Second, it is paramount that affordable housing options are improved. Leaders should partner with developers to create high-quality, accessible housing at affordable rates, so adults with disabilities can afford to live alone and be independent without having to rely on family members.

I believe my story emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for autonomy. I am a proud advocate for community living opportunities that foster support and independence for the disability community and believe these are the foundation for a life with dignity. ■



Jordan

"Ubuntu" means "I am because we are." That South African word has shaped my whole understanding of community, belonging, and what it means to live a good life. Growing up in Durban, South Africa, on the warm beaches of the East Coast, I learned that who I am is deeply connected to the people around me. I never imagined that years later, that same belief would guide me into a community in Nashville that would change my life.

I didn't come to the world of disability services through a degree or formal training. In fact, when the first Friendship House (now Our Place Nashville) opened in 2015, I was just a newly married guy working with refugees. I cared deeply about people, justice, and community, but I had never worked in disability services before.

> "HIGH HOUSING COSTS, LIMITED SUPPORT, AND A LACK OF COMMUNITY-BASED OPTIONS MAKE INDEPENDENCE FEEL OUT OF REACH."

When Jaco Hamman, a fellow South African and co-founder of the project, asked my wife and me if we wanted to move into the first Friendship House community and serve as resident directors, I honestly didn't know what to expect. But I said yes! Because Ubuntu tells us that we grow into our best selves when we share life with others.

Living in that first community changed me. I learned that every person, whether they have a disability or not, brings something meaningful to the table. We ate together, laughed together, and figured things out together. I learned how to be a better neighbor, a better friend, and a more patient listener. I thought I was stepping in to *help*, but I received so much more in return. Again… Ubuntu. We all give, and we all receive.

In 2017, I moved back to South Africa to do nonprofit work, but Our Place never really left me. When I returned to Nashville in 2020, I was stunned to see how much it had grown, from a single building with four adults with disabilities and a few student residents to multiple inclusive communities across the city. When the opportunity came to serve as associate director, I knew I wanted to continue the work that had shaped me so deeply. And in 2024, I stepped into the role of executive director.

My perspective has shifted over the years, but the core remains the same: people thrive when they're connected. People with disabilities want the same things we all want; friendship, independence, safety, and a place to belong. But in Tennessee, there are still too few options for adults with disabilities to access that kind of life in a community. Today, many adults with disabilities live with their families not by choice, but by necessity. High housing costs, limited support, and a lack of community-based options make independence feel out of reach. Some live alone without a community and become isolated, something I've seen lead to increased depression, anxiety, and a sense of invisibility.

But I've also seen the opposite. I've seen how shared living, intentional friendships, and mixed-ability communities can bring out confidence, capability, and joy that isolation would have buried. I've seen adults flourish when they are supported rather than sheltered, and when they are treated as neighbors and contributors, not as people to be managed.

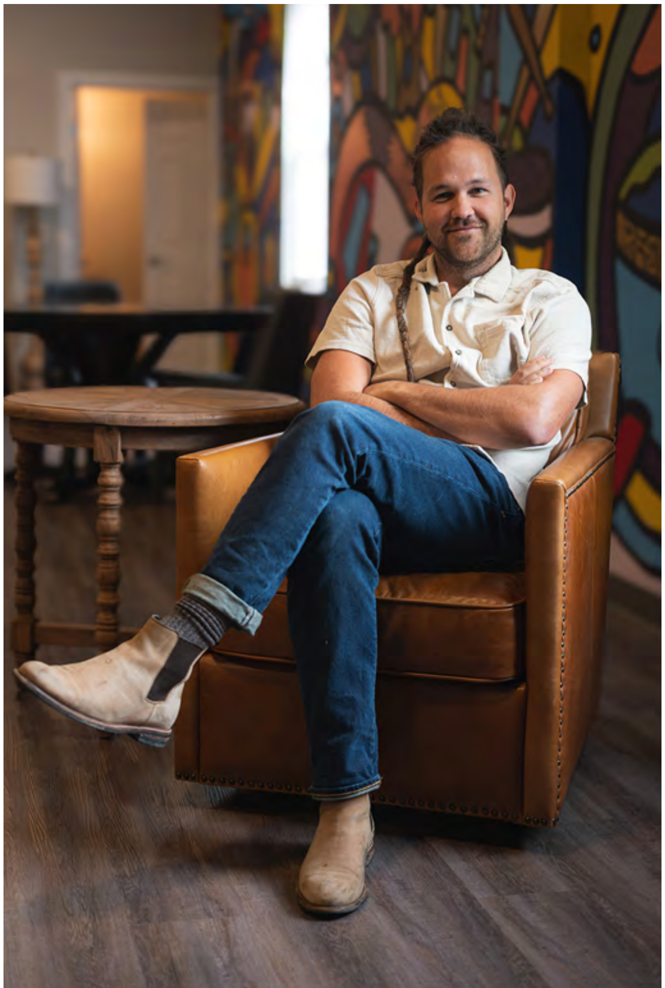
We have an opportunity and a responsibility to create more pathways to thriving for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Tennessee has taken steps forward, but the need is still far greater than the resources available. Too many families are on waiting lists. Too many adults are struggling with housing instability. Too many Tennesseans are doing everything "right" and still finding no path forward. What we need now is legislative commitment that matches the scale of the need.

When we invest in community living, we reduce caregiver burden and improve quality of life. I believe Tennessee has the vision, the compassion, and the leadership to expand these opportunities.

My hope for the future is grounded in collaboration. No single organization can solve this alone. We need partners, religious institutions with unused land, city leaders, housing developers, donors, students who are willing to live in community. Every piece matters.

Because community isn't an abstract idea. It's a choice we make. It's people showing up for each other. It's the belief that we all do better when we do it together. Ubuntu. I am because we are. ■



Resources

Statewide	
Tennessee Housing Development Agency (THDA)	thda.org
Tennessee Public Housing Authorities	hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PIH/documents/PHA_Contact_Report_TN.pdf
Creative Homes Initiative	tn.gov/behavioral-health/housing/creating-homes-initiative.html
Recovery Within Reach	recoverywithinreach.org/housing/creating-homes-initiative/
TN Housing Search	tnhousingsearch.org
Tennessee Disability Pathfinder which offers resources to access affordable housing	TNPathfinder.org

Middle TN	
Metro Development and Housing Agency (MDHA)	nashville-mdha.org
Urban Housing Solutions	urbanhousingsolutions.org/who-we-help/
Cumberland Regional Development Corporation	ucdd.org/housingandfamilyservices/crdc/
Woodbine Community Organization	woodbinecommunity.org

East TN	
Tennessee Valley Housing Services	tvhstn.org
Creative Compassion	ccihomes.org
SOAR TN	soartn.org

West TN	
Memphis Housing Authority	memphisha.org

Thanks

These stories were collected through interviews conducted by Vanderbilt University students as part of the 2025-26 Tennessee Kindred Stories of Disability project. This annual project gives students, who plan to be future educators, advocates, and researchers, an opportunity to learn firsthand from individuals with disabilities, families, and disability professionals. The project's culminating booklets are shared with legislators and policymakers each year to educate them about issues that impact their constituents with disabilities and their families.

We would like to thank the participants who shared their stories this year to educate Tennessee legislators and policymakers. While this booklet does not include every story we heard, all were equally compelling and shared similar themes to those included in the booklet.

The images that accompany the stories were provided by photographer Drew Hulsey from AbleVoices. We are grateful for the partnership with AbleVoices, which provides photography programs for individuals with disabilities as a means for self-expression, empowerment, and advocacy.

An additional thanks to Vanderbilt graduate students Camille Reynolds and Emily Thomas, who coordinated and contributed many hours to the project this year. And thank you to all the students who conducted the interviews, listened deeply, and enabled the sharing of these stories.

WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE PARTICIPANTS WHO SHARED THEIR STORIES THIS YEAR TO EDUCATE TENNESSEE LEGISLATORS AND POLICYMAKERS.

About Us

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities** provides innovative leadership in education, research, and services to people with disabilities, the community, and families. All activities promote the independence, self-determination, productivity, integration, and belonging of individuals with developmental disabilities and provide supports for families.

- vkc.vumc.org/ucedd
- (615) 322-8240 or toll free (866) 936-8852

The Arc Tennessee empowers people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families to actively participate in the community throughout their lifetime. The Arc Tennessee's goal is to provide information and resources during the journey of raising a child with a disability to lead a full, independent, and meaningful life.

- thearctn.org
- (615) 248-5878

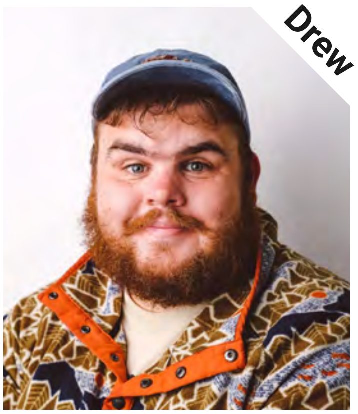
AbleVoices works to amplify the voices of youth and adults with disabilities through the medium of photography. The organization serves individuals living with physical, intellectual, developmental, and learning disabilities, chronic illness, and mental health conditions. AbleVoices teaches photography as a means for self-expression, creativity, social connection, community engagement, work-based learning, and supported employment.

- ablevoices.org
- (615) 571-1073

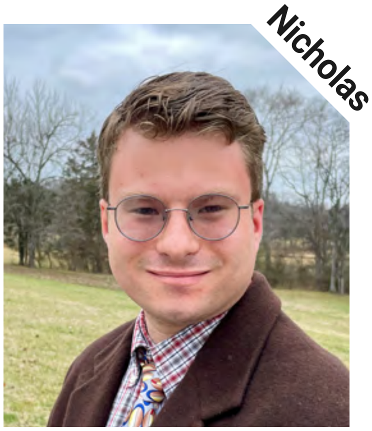
About the Photographers

Drew Hulsey is an AbleVoices photographer and freelance photojournalist based in Middle Tennessee. He is a proud advocate for individuals with disabilities and a person on the autism spectrum. Drew brings a unique and thoughtful perspective to his storytelling.
In his hometown of Columbia, Tennessee, Drew has led community photo walks in partnership with AbleVoices, encouraging others to explore self-expression through photography. His passion lies in showing others that their personal perspective is not only valid—but essential—in telling meaningful visual stories.

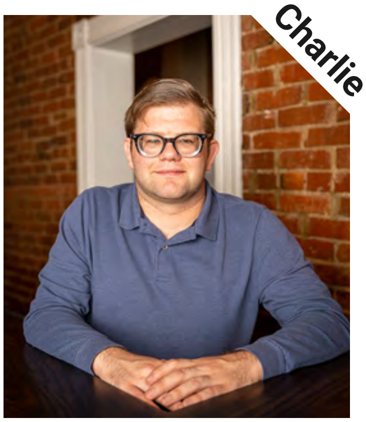
Drew was assisted during the photo shoots by AbleVoices Photo Academy photographers Nicholas Coakley and Charlie Burrows.



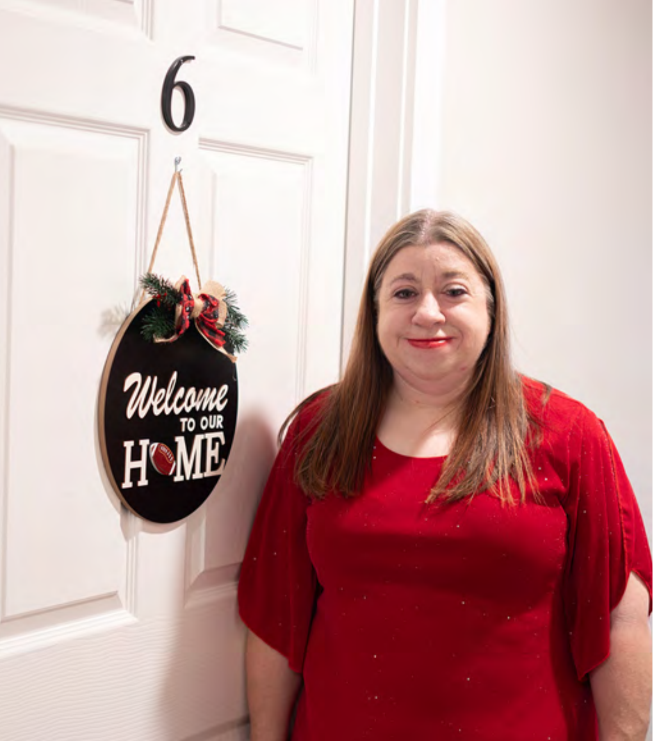
Drew

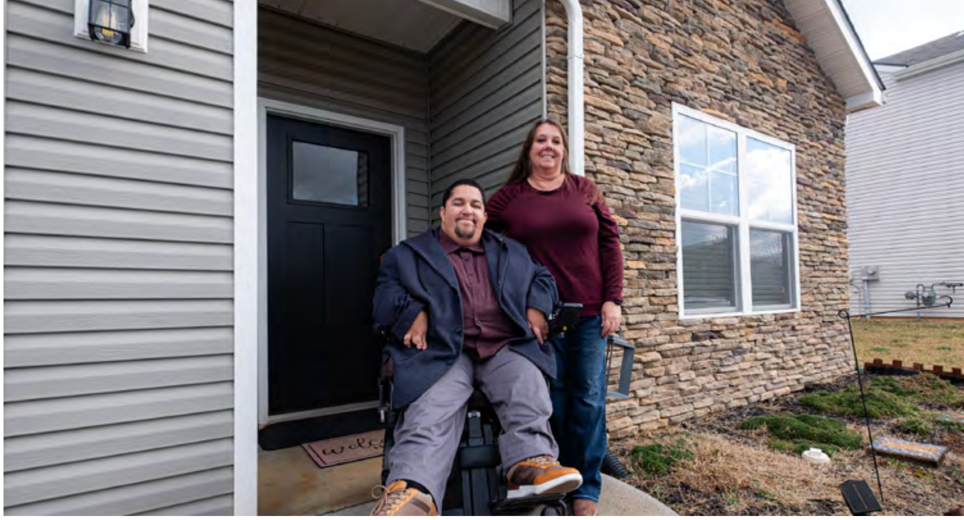


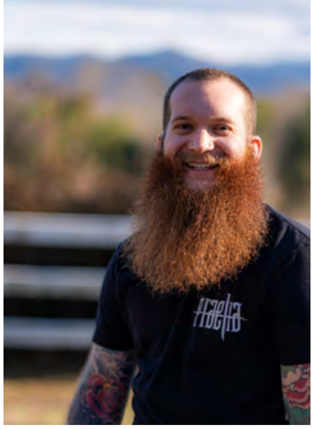
Nicholas

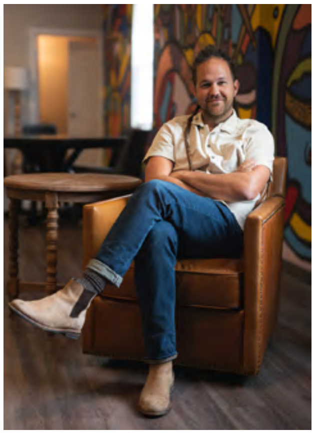


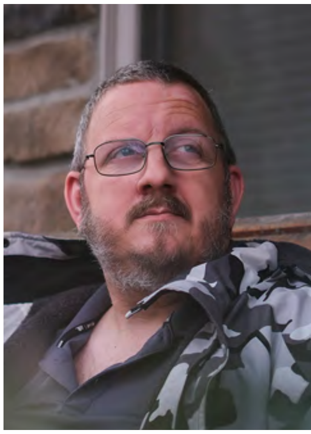
Charlie

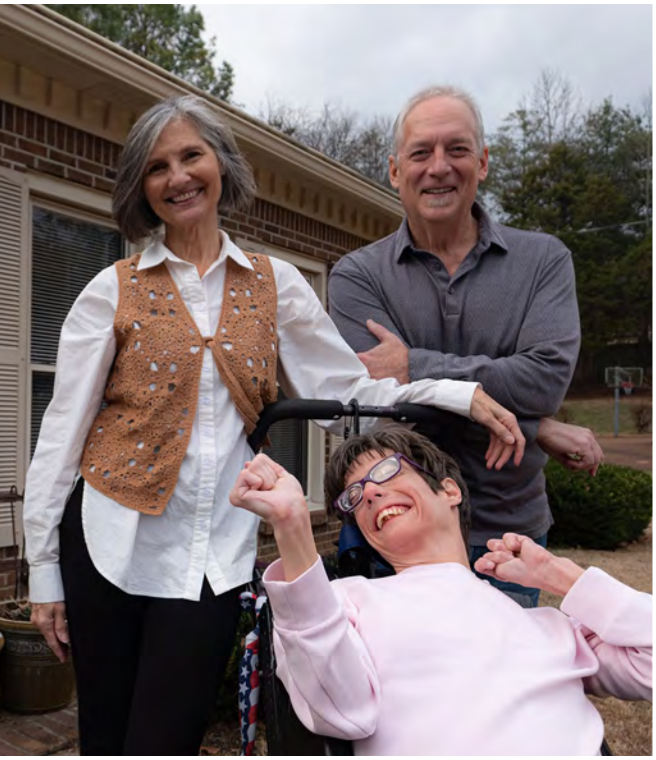


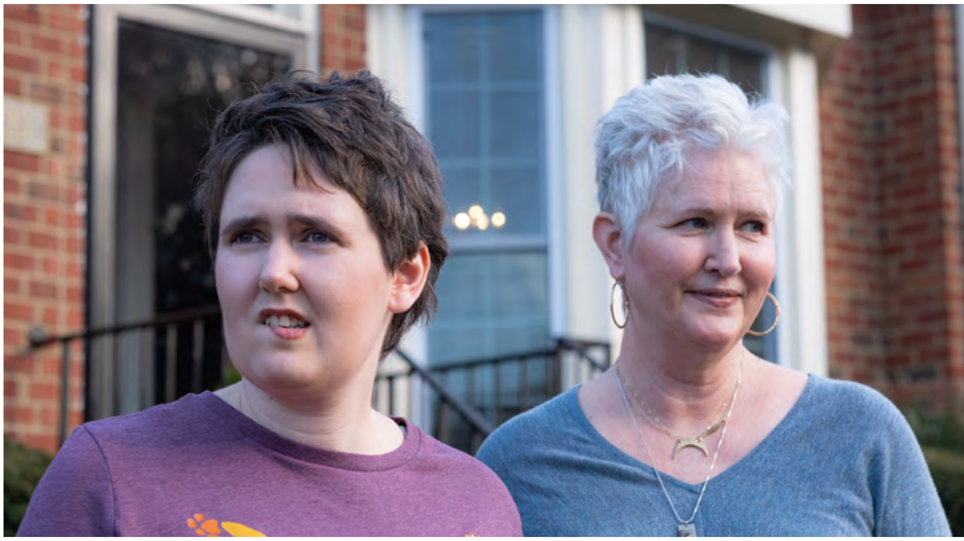












This annual project allows future educators, advocates, and researchers to learn directly from people with disabilities, their families, and disability professionals. View Kindred Stories online at vkc.vumc.org/kindred.