

Building it from Bottom to Top

Denis's Story

That wide-eyed 4-year-old boy couldn't know, when he first set foot in this country, that twenty-two years later that same foot would be on a spade, digging into the earth in front of what would someday be his new home. Denis's story – from his first years in a Russian orphanage through growing up in his loving adoptive family to his current steady employment with a Valley tea purveyor – is one of working hard and keeping after personal goals.

Denis is excited at the prospect of helping to build his home, which will be a small 650 square foot house, the first small home to be built as part of Pioneer Valley Habitat's Big Enough initiative. "It's a great feeling, to get a home and start building it from bottom to top," he says. Denis is not a complete construction novice – his years at White Oak High School gave him the opportunity to use hand and power tools in carpentry class where he fashioned a table and bench, turned a pastry roller on a lathe, made ballpoint pens and a baseball bat. He and his classmates built a shed in back of the school, so he already has experience in small home construction.



Since graduating from high school, Denis has been living with his mother and working as a machine operator, first at Yankee Candle and for the past two years at Tea Guys. His steps toward independence included looking for apartments and realizing that most of what he saw was out of reach financially, and then attending a first-time homebuyers class through GCC. Through that class, he says, he met "real estate agents, plumbers, electricians, all kinds of folks" who helped him to understand what it's like to consider purchasing a home. That was about the time he heard that Habitat was accepting applications for home ownership and his mom encouraged him to go for it. His successful application was chosen in the lottery in June 2018.

"I want to get out in the world on my own, learn new things, start a new chapter in the book, see how life can be," Denis says. He acknowledges that "there are gonna be challenges along the way," but for this determined young man who has steadily added to his tool box and skill set, the challenges will likely only fortify him for the homeownership years ahead.