

In This Home I Plan to Build a Bond with My Children

Fenessa's Story



Sixteen years ago, Fenessa and Orlando met as teenagers when Orlando arrived from Trinidad and began attending the same Brooklyn high school as Fenessa. Fast forward to today, when they and their two daughters will be moving into one of Pioneer Valley Habitat's experimental modular homes in Northampton after a long and arduous road to becoming homeowners.

Their story began in Brooklyn, where their first apartment cost \$900/month and their month-to-month lease meant no housing security. There was no heat or hot water, and Fenessa remembers having to boil water while pregnant to wash up in a lukewarm bath. They did their best to create some stability for their young family.

With dim prospects in New York, they came to Massachusetts where they had family who they hoped might help guide them. What they bumped up against, again and again, was the difficulties Orlando's citizenship status presented for both of them in maintaining employment, housing and the kind of family life and the security that confers to a young, hardworking couple. They worked tirelessly to adapt to nontraditional roles of parenting: Fenessa was the financial supporter and Orlando was the caregiver. Fenessa expresses how hard these years were for her. "It took away from me as a mother, leading me to feel guilty that I had to work longer or inconsistent hours to meet some kind of quota/income that would grant my husband citizenship. It led me to miss out on important milestones in my children's life."

After balancing minimum wage jobs, Fenessa's enrolling in school, raising their girls and living through many substandard housing situations, Fenessa and Orlando finally caught a break: a childhood friend was able to sponsor Orlando so that he could proceed toward citizenship. He finally achieved that goal last December.



And now Fenessa says, "It is because of Habitat that I feel my hard work did not go in vain and my kids will see now why I sacrificed so many cuddles for a future that could provide stability. It was for them! In this home I plan to build a bond with my children, one that I thought I had lost."

Now that Orlando is working steadily, the couple is budgeting and making plans for their future. Orlando is handy and will putter in their home and garden and Fenessa is already thinking about her next degree in school. They envision outdoorsy trips and camping...and best of all, as animal lovers, all four can't wait to have a dog.