

# Herlinda & Roberto's Story

## From the Ground Up

*“Is this real?? This is really happening!”*



Herlinda and Roberto are no strangers to building something from the ground up. Before they met each other in Colombia, Herlinda was part of a mission team that planted and grew a church in Barranquilla, Colombia seven years ago while Roberto, working with the community, helped build a park in one of the barrios. Not to be outdone, son David has his own favorite claim to fame: “I was born in a barn!”

When Herlinda and the children (David and his younger sister Ruthie) returned to western Massachusetts after their mission was completed, Roberto remained in Colombia. For Herlinda, finding an affordable place to live proved difficult. They had left their belongings behind in Colombia, Herlinda needed to find a job and housing, and she was working toward a degree at UMass while home schooling two young children. “Things were so crazy!” she remembers, shaking her head. She and the children moved from place to place – from Springfield to Sunderland to Southampton to Holyoke – and, in the process, from a room in a friend’s house where the three of them shared a bed to other places where friends loaned them what they would need to get by. They are very grateful to their church and friends who loved, cared, and supported them during this hard time. After more than two years of this difficult struggle, Roberto was able to rejoin them in the United States, bringing much needed stability to the family.

Herlinda had heard about an opportunity to apply for a Habitat home but since she was focused on getting her family back on their feet after returning to the U.S., the timing just didn’t work. When Herlinda finished her schooling and was hired at Community Action, they started saving, “putting money in envelopes under the mattress,” and when another Habitat opportunity arose, this time for a home in Conway, the couple leapt at the chance. They attended information sessions, took notes, and asked questions. They piled into the car with David and Ruthie and drove out to look at the site. They got their financial statements together... and applied.

The day of the lottery to determine the future Conway homeowner, Herlinda and Roberto and their children gathered together as a family at their place in Holyoke. They ordered Chinese food and pizza and had a cake and huddled around the computer to watch the zoom proceedings as the selection was made. When they got the call confirming that theirs was the name chosen, Herlinda says, “the neighbors must have been so confused! We started screaming, we left all the food and ran over to the site. We kept saying, ‘Is this real? This is really happening!’”

Now, they are out building their future home every chance they get. In fact, they sometimes work on another Habitat project to help another family with the building of their future home. Whether out on the build site or in her work as an advocate for housing security and workforce development, Herlinda says about herself and Roberto, “We love getting involved. I just want to help others just like people helped me.”