



HOMELESS & HOUSING COALITION OF KENTUCKY

Lexington, KY- On a sunny deck on a chilly, early spring day, Davita Gatewood and her children laughed and made jokes about the surprise Friday off from school. Their timid-but-loud dog joined them. Obadiah, her quiet, superhuman strong 18 year old son, eventually scooped the dog up all at once, bear hugging him back into the house behind a closed door. “He’s so loud but if you even look at him mean he’ll hurry off”, Obadiah laughed. “That dog may sound scary but that’s about it - he sure doesn’t act scary.”

The family’s housing story is one rife with miles of red tape, landlords and property managers unwilling to compromise, city housing authority offices inundated with work and not enough staff, and affordable housing that is just out of reach. Many stories are the same - this is not an uncommon situation. Davita’s case is unique in that this time, the protagonist is also the victim.



Davita & Keder Gatewood

Davita, a University of Kentucky graduate and former journalist, community activist and mother of six, is facing a heartbreaking, wildly frustrating situation. She and her children, Obadiah (18), Ny’ Ashia (15), Asan (14), and Keder (8) have lived in their one-story, 4 bedroom home now for 4 years. “It’s all my older kids have known since they all got into high school”, Davita said. “We’re so close to everything, all their friends, the schools - everything is a quick car ride or bus ride for us. That kind of thing is important when you have a bunch of busy kids, you know?” And they are busy. Davita’s 3 middle children, the aforementioned dog wrangler included, all attend rigorous magnet schools in Lexington. On top of their academic work, Ny’ Ashia is on the cheer team, and Obadiah plays lacrosse and just received a scholarship to play football in college. They have 4.1 and 4.0 GPAs, respectively. Asan, a sharply dressed high school freshman, is in the Art Club and Technology Club. She also has two sons excelling at the University of Louisville. Amir, a junior who studies and holds down a job, and Nkosi, a sophomore who just made the Dean’s List. Rounding out the accomplished bunch is Kedar, age 8, who has special needs, shines when he sees his big brothers and sister, and is delighted being on the photographer’s end of a camera.

Last December, Davita was abruptly informed by the acting property manager that she’d have to be out of the home by February. The landlord was selling the house - close to booming Downtown Lexington - to a developer to flip, and presumably sell again at a mark-up. “Gentrification is killing everyone, everything. There’s no control over it, either. If you got the money, you can do it.”



HOMELESS & HOUSING COALITION OF KENTUCKY

Knowing the reality of the market, Davita was immediately worried about looking for a new rental in the same neighborhood, or at least close. “It’s not just uprooting me, it’s uprooting a family. Our stability. Can you imagine having to move your senior year, right at the end?”

The family has been using a Section 8 voucher to cover their rent for the past several years. Upon learning that they would eventually have to move, Davita got to work making calls. Legal Aid lawyers, community advocates, local nonprofits, and city government offices.



“I went through the chain of command [in city government] like you’re supposed to. I called my councilwoman, Liz Sheehan - she’s on the Homelessness Prevention Board. I called the Office of Homelessness Prevention. I called the Housing Authority. I called everybody you’re supposed to. I left messages, called back, sent emails - I got the runaround.”

Ny'Ashia Gatewood

On top of hitting daily roadblocks trying to find help from government offices and overwhelmed nonprofits, Davita also quickly learned how few options were out there for families using Section 8 vouchers. “It [Section 8] is great, sure. If you can find somebody to take it. I’ve asked in groups online, I have talked to private landlords, I have pounded the pavement - everywhere, everybody that will actually take Section 8 is full. Community Action only has information for apartments; if you got a big family, they don’t have anything for you. Urban League has housing, but they’re full. Lexington Rental Homes rents to Section 8, but they’re full. Nobody has anything available.” She has been met with some answers from people telling her to ‘just move’. “Just move where?”, she questions. “To some bad neighborhood where we’re gonna have to worry about gunshots every night? You see all these empty houses sitting out there in Polo Club and Brighton Place - nobody can afford them, so they just sit empty. There’s hundreds of families like ours who are good tenants, good families, we just need a place to go. It’s wrong that those places sit there when they could be giving people like us a place to be. Just because we use Section 8 doesn’t mean we are bad people.” Davita is well versed in affordable housing. She knows how it works, where the monies come from, and, from years of experience, has fact based ideas about how the whole system could be better managed. “There’s so many different ways they [city government and nonprofits] could utilize the resources that they have to help more people. Community Action is sitting on money that’s just sitting - why hold it up like that? I know people who have worked in the city offices before and talk about how understaffed they are. How can they help people if they don’t even have enough people working to answer the phones and call people back? People could have homes with all the money that’s out there floating around. Instead, eviction courts are every day and they’re still backed up - nobody is advocating for those who need affordable housing. It doesn’t have to be this hard, the resources are there.”



HOMELESS & HOUSING COALITION OF KENTUCKY

Ny' Ashia, a quiet, athletic 15 year old with a 10,000-watt smile, has her own thoughts on the situation. "It's stressful for me, yeah. I stay really busy with school and cheerleading and work, so knowing that we have to move, but not knowing where we're going to move... it's scary. I have so much stuff to pack, and I'm gonna have to change cheerleading schools, and what if this happens again? All my friends are here, and thinking I may have to leave all my friends, and leave my job, my cheer squad - my whole life. Is it always gonna be moving around like this?" Davita is clearly upset by her daughter's anxiety. "These are good kids, all of them. They work so hard. They deserve something better than being worried about where we'll go." Asan, the sharply dressed Technology and Art Club member, weighed in, too. "It's unfair. All of this is. People don't have a clue what's really going on. My mom is dealing with stuff, my siblings are, I am - we just... we need more time. Mom is running us all around all the time, doing so much for us, especially with my little brother - I just want to help. I want to do anything I can to help."

Homeownership is on Davita's radar. Her youngest son, burgeoning photographer Kedar, has special needs. Unable to attend school, he had been attending medical daycare prior to COVID. During early Covid restrictions, transportation to and from the daycare ceased, leaving Davita with no way to get him there and back.



Asan Gatewood/Parks

"I've got 3 other kids to get around town", she explained. "It just wasn't gonna work with the schedule of his school combined with their schools, so I kept him home." Last year, Kedar was granted a Michelle P. waiver, which allows his mother to be his caretaker at home, and be paid the same as the medical daycare was. "It's income. It's a job - he requires full time care - and it's supposed to be counted like a regular income. The waiver allows for that." However, when Davita enrolled in mandatory HUD homeowner classes - a requirement to qualify for the mortgage - they told her that she didn't have the necessary 12 months of employment, since she had only recently taken over Kedar's full time care, and that she also wouldn't meet the requirement of spending the last 12 months in the same home - the home she is being thrown out of due to the sale.



"How do I get around that? I've been employed for 12 months with income. I have a downpayment. We need to have been living here the 12 most recent months, but my landlord sure isn't gonna let us stay until next September so I can check that box - there's no way around it, even though we're just months short of being able to get in the [HUD home ownership] program. (cont'd)

"Kedar Up Close" by Ny' Ashia Gatewood



HOMELESS & HOUSING COALITION OF KENTUCKY

The more I look, the more it seems like my hands are tied. The Legal Aid lawyer was pretty straight up with me. He told me that the landlords - right now, the landlords have all the power.” Davita has reached out to Facebook groups, as well, making contact with a woman who is a mortgage specialist, and eventually wants to help Davita get set up to do a conventional mortgage, and be done with needing any sort of assistance or approval from any government entities.



Despite what seems like an insurmountable issue in front of her with no way around it, Davita remains focused and determined. She is working with an attorney from Legal Aid of the Bluegrass, and is praying that when the eviction date comes, something - anything - will have been worked out giving her some room to breathe, and work on a permanent solution.

Keder & Ny'Ashia Gatewood

“I worry so much about these kids”, she solemnly added. “I’m willing to work, to get creative, to get loud, to fight. There’s too much out there that could help us for me to just give up now.” As Kedar climbed out of his mom’s lap, gleefully trotting laps around the back porch, happy, healthy, and unaware of the stressful realities his family is facing, Davita pressed on. “Of course I’m gonna keep fighting. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but we’ve got nothing to lose - we’re already losing.”

UPDATE: on April 1st, Davita and her children were given two months - until June 1st, 2022 - to stay in their home. Her search for a place for the family to go continues.



Keder & Ny'Ashia Gatewood