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Zinnia: An Affordable Housing Story

How it changed our lives.



The cost of housing throughout southern California is rising exponentially. The lack of wage increases, especially on the lower end of the income spectrum, is one of the major components leading to the increase in homelessness. Due to the extreme lack of affordable housing, there is a huge gap between the number of families that need housing and the availability to house them. Therefore, it can take years for an individual or family to find a decent place to call home.

When a new housing community becomes available, the arduous application process can be a roller coaster of emotions. There are a lot of ups and downs. For most, the downs outnumber the ups. Once an application is accepted, the sense of relief can be overwhelming leading to tears of joy.

Studio One Eleven took the time to talk to some of the residents and wanted to share their inspiring stories and the profound impact having a place to call home had on them.



Zinnia Affordable Housing

Rathana's Story

Rathana So, Zinnia's on-site Community Manager had fallen on hard times. Like many of Zinnia's residents, she had difficulty finding not only a job, but an affordable place to live. Rathana spent her time between living on a boat donated by a stranger and staying on friends' sofas. Due to Rathana's instability, her children went to live out of state with their dad.

While looking for a job, Rathana came across the Community Manager position at Zinnia. Although she didn't have experience in the affordable housing rental process, Rathana did have experience as a property manager for a market-rate complex. Going through the interview process was stressful. Being hired not only meant she would be employed, but the position came with an apartment. This would provide the stability she needed for both herself and her children.

For Rathana, managing an affordable housing complex has been a humbling experience. She gets to meet different people of varied backgrounds, each with a unique story. "I was so happy to welcome and hug each and every single family to Zinnia. Their faces of joy to be able to call this home was one of the proudest moments of my life".

Rathana can see the excitement in the children's faces when they say they have their own rooms. "The beautiful modern kitchen with granite countertops and the spacious layouts really would make anyone proud to call this home. Every person I've encountered is struggling with something. My heart is filled with compassion and hope that more communities like Zinnia will inspire others to do more good in this world."

Rathana recently won a grant from the Downtown Long Beach Alliance to start her plant-based food company called PlantBerri. It will provide sustainable healthy plant-based Grab & Go food at convenient locations.



Rathana So

Keishalle's Story

Keishalle Barrow is a single mother of six living in one of Zinnia's beautiful three bedroom apartments. After separating from her husband, Keishalle and her children moved from one place to another, including a cramped room in a Motel 6. Keishalle's story is one of true belief and optimism.

Keishalle saw Zinnia being built across the street from her children's school and registered on the waiting list. The application process was not a tranquil time for Keishalle. As she anxiously waited for news from Zinnia, she struggled with the idea of possibly not getting the apartment. Unfortunately, her worst fear came true; Keishalle received a call the units were filled. Despite the bad news, she wouldn't give up hope.

"At first all the apartments were filled so we didn't get one. However, one of the families in a 3-bedroom apartment had backed out, so I received the call and was so thankful to God for providing a place for us," said Keishalle joyfully, "I cried for two days. My kids and I were so happy because we were finally getting some stability. We live in a safe area, we know our neighbors, and we're close to everything. This was exactly what we needed."

Since moving to Zinnia Keishalle's children are excelling in school. They no longer have to worry about a roof over their heads. Keishalle exclaimed, "I'm a happy mom! They're getting good grades and are on the honor roll. I'm so proud of them!" In fact, her oldest daughter who is in 9th grade scored so high on the PSAT she will be enrolled in AP courses for the following academic year.



Keishalle Barrow

David's Story

David Carter's priority was doing what was best for his children. He is a single father of a five year old daughter and a four year old son. Prior to moving to Zinnia, David lived in Los Angeles but his children went to daycare in Long Beach. Since their mother was a student at Cal State Long Beach they had access to free child care. Driving all the way across Los Angeles was very tough on him and his family, but he endured it for his children.

Waiting to find out if he would be accepted to Zinnia was not easy for David, "it was stressful, it was terrible, I'm not going to lie," David explained. After a worrisome year-long application process, David was over the moon when he got the call that he and his family were accepted. Today, David and his children live in a three bedroom apartment. For the first time his children have their own bedrooms. David is very appreciative of the opportunity he was given since he knows how difficult and gut wrenching the process can be. "When I see people driving by, asking questions, I feel so grateful," David expresses.

When asked what he appreciates most about living in this community, he responded: "just being able to have my own keys, open my door, and lock the door. Feeling free." David and his children enjoy having their own space, a safe environment, a nice community, and a school right across the street.



David Carter

Shintara's Story

Last, but definitely not least, is the motivating story of Shintara Ordonez. Shintara is a hard-working single mother of an eight year old son and a seven year old daughter. We learned how appreciative she is of what she has now, especially when she told us of her journey to Zinnia.

"Before Zinnia my previous residence was terrible," Shintara explained, "there was a rodent problem, it was mice. In total we caught eleven, under the microwave, under the dishwasher, and in my kids' bedroom." While she applied to Zinnia, she had a tough decision to make, which was to either move to a different apartment and lose their chance of living at Zinnia or wait it out till their application for Zinnia was accepted.

Fortunately, Shintara decided to wait it out in the hopes of being accepted at Zinnia. For the time being she would have to keep fending off mice and keep the mold at bay. Shintara believed it was worth the risk and in the end her choice and sacrifice paid off. She and her children are ecstatic in their new two bedroom apartment.

Shintara can't say enough about her great experience living at Zinnia. Her children love being able to walk to the park and have a safe environment in which they can play. "I'm very happy here, I plan to be here for a long time," Shintara explains. Most importantly, she has not had the need to fend off any more rodents and does not foresee having to do that anymore in the future.



Shintara Ordonez



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*This was an internal study conducted by Studio One Eleven and includes our assessment of the project.