

## “Home”

By Rhiannon O’Leary

During the pandemic, I bought a house. It was the most important moment of my life. I didn’t even really know what the word mortgage meant before. My realtors, my housing counselor and my loan officer explained every step of the process in detail. I was really lucky to get down payment assistance, but the requirements created a lot of challenges. And Covid slowed everything down.

At one point after six months of working on this and risking everything, it seemed like the deal was not going to go through. But my realtor Erin demanded, appealed, compelled, micromanaged. She cut her own costs, had me write a letter to the seller, and pleaded with the seller’s realtor.

They all worked so hard for me because they knew my story.

In 2016, my family was homeless. I brought my three siblings and my mom from Michigan so they could live with me. In the beginning, along with my friend, there were six of us living in a two bedroom apartment. I was the head of household. We had a lot of housing insecurity growing up. We were always moving, always being evicted, at one point living in a motorhome in someone’s front yard. As a teenager I escaped this by moving in with my grandparents.

At age 16, I started working, started sending money to my family and saving as much as I could. At age 26, my family was now independent and moving out. The last big goal I set for myself, the thing I dreamed of, was to buy a house.

When I got the keys, it was the happiest moment of my entire life. But I kept asking myself “Am I allowed? Am I allowed to own a house?”

A year later, I sat alone in the quiet of my home. Covid had kept me inside my home by myself most of the time. I had my own nest, but now it was empty. The weight of responsibility for my family was lifted from my shoulders. I didn’t know what to do next. My friends told me “now it’s time to enjoy what you worked for and live for yourself.”

I’m still figuring out what that means. I thought buying a house would relieve me of all my problems and I’d finally have peace.

I have so much gratitude for what I have. But I also have so much anger that other people don’t have that. And I have guilt that finding stability in the chaos of Covid didn’t suddenly heal me. My nervous system still feels all the years of instability. All the obligations I had over the years are a ghost weight still bringing me down.

I made it out, but I wonder: why do we have to sacrifice so much to have our basic needs met? So many people in Tucson are experiencing evictions and rent hikes. And it’s getting worse since Covid. So many of us grow up thinking we might never be allowed to feel secure. Even when we do everything right, everything we’re supposed to do, it doesn’t bring us peace. We still don’t feel at home.