

FEATURED

Lawrenceville family celebrates completion of home ownership program

By Curt Yeomans

curt.yeomans@gwinnettdaily.com Aug 10, 2017



Clarence Johnson addresses attendees at a ceremony to recognize he and his wife for completing the Lawrenceville Housing Authority's Pathway Home program on Thursday as the authority's Executive Director, Lejla Slowinski, looks on. (Staff Photo: Curt Yeomans)

For Clarence and Elese Johnson, the green two-story house that they now call home has a deeper meaning than just being a place with four walls and a roof that they can live in.

It's a chance to bring stability and permanency into their lives, as well as the lives of their six children. Clarence is track maintenance worker for MARTA while Elese has a bachelor's degree in social work.

It wasn't until they got into the Lawrenceville Housing Authority's Pathway Home program two years ago, however, that they got on track to move from renting a home to live in to being homeowners themselves. They recently completed the program and moved into their new home over the summer.

"It's been really good," Elese said. "The kids have really adjusted to it. They just fit right in."

The couple celebrated their new status as homeowners on Thursday during a ceremony in their front yard to recognize their completion of the Lawrenceville Housing Authority's Pathway Home program — which helped them get into the home.

While employment and education wasn't an issue for Clarence and Elese, they had other issues to contend with.

The big issue was finding affordable housing which, over the years, proved to not be easy for the couple. In addition to having six children between 6 and 22, two of the kids have autism and require special modifications to the home.

"With the autism, it's hard for them to deal with changes," Elese said.

At one time, about a decade ago, the family did own a home in the area, but they were spread across two states. While Clarence worked for a transit system in New York, Elese and the kids lived in Georgia. While Clarence was eventually able to get a job with MARTA, which allowed him to move to Georgia to be with his family, it came with a catch.

He had to take a \$13,000 per year pay cut as a result because, while housing costs can be higher in New York state, so is the pay.

“The house became unaffordable,” Clarence said.

While they looked for a home, they rented places to stay and also turned to housing assistance programs. That eventually led to them getting in touch with Family Promise of Gwinnett. It was through Family Promise that they were eventually put in touch with the Lawrenceville Housing Authority.

They entered the housing authority’s Pathway Home program about two years ago. The program teaches people who are having trouble finding affordable permanent housing how to get back on their feet, how to manage debt and credit, and how to continue to be homeowners.

The couple said the information they learned through the program was invaluable, including learning about saving money and monitoring their credit scores.

“It was a life-changing situation for us,” Clarence said. “It showed us what we’ve been doing wrong and how to go about making things right.”

While they have been working through the program since about 2015, the realization didn’t sink in until they got the news from Lawrenceville Housing Authority Executive Director Lejla Slowinski that the organization had found a home for them.

“I think it was a blessing because, you know, to get another opportunity at home ownership, it was like ‘OK, now what are we going to do about this one?’” Clarence said. “It’s like everything we went through, or everything we learned, when we were going through the temporary housing or the classes that we went to and the things that we learned about just came into place.”

The couple also didn’t want to take any chances with this home.

“We were fully prepared and ready for this because of the two years of going to all of these classes and to the home buyers workshop — not once, but twice — we knew what documents they needed and the deadlines, so we made sure we did everything,” Elese said

The family moved into their new home June 28.

When the housing authority acquired the home for the Johnsons, it needed work. Housing authority Real Estate and Grants Manager Ebony Starks said it needed about \$80,000 in rehabilitation work, including installing a new deck and a new front staircase, but the authority got it done for a little less than that.

Part of the cost included making adaptations to the home for the two children who have autism, such as adding extra handrails and making sure there was a ground-level entrance in the garage. Accessibility was key issue that the group wanted to address, as well as livability, and the work has not gone unappreciated by the family.

“We just feel blessed and appreciative that they were able to accommodate all of our needs,” Elese said.

The couple took out their first mortgage on their new home with Brand Mortgage who worked with them to get their mortgage payments set at just over \$900. That is less than the Gwinnett median rental price of about \$1,029, Slowinski said.

Brand Mortgage CEO Greg Shumate echoed those sentiments, saying the home that the Johnsons moved into could have fetched a rental price of \$1,200 to \$1,400.

"You start looking at 'What does that mean,'" he said. "The homeowner is now a permanent resident instead of a transient resident, the kids are more stable in school, the neighborhood has now got each other and they can rely on each other if one kid gets sick and there's a mom that can cover for another mom or a dad. ...

"And because that payment is cheaper, they've got more disposable income that they can spend at local businesses. They can get a more fuel efficient economical car that's more reliable to get them to work every day."

But one thing that officials agreed on is how happy they were for the family and why it was good to help the Johnsons.

They praised Clarence and Elese for their commitment to the program — the couple has pledged to give back and help the housing authority as volunteers or mentors when needed — and for work to get a home to raise their family in.

"They are an amazing family," Slowinski said. "Gwinnett County would be worse off if we lost them to someplace else."



Lawrenceville family celebrates completion of home ownership program
Curt Yeomans Aug 10, 2017

Curt Yeomans

I'm a Crawford Long baby who grew up in Marietta. I eventually wandered away from home and attended the University of Southern Mississippi, in Hattiesburg, Miss., where I first tried my hand at majoring in film for a couple of years. And then political sc