

Cynthia Hardy: So, talk to me a little bit about what you know about Gonzales Gardens.

Sanovia Jones: Well, it's housing-based, and we were given opportunities through housing, furthering education, help you find jobs, career development. There was some positive things. But we also had negative as well.

Cynthia Hardy: That's right. So, tell me about when you went to live there. How old were you, how long were you there? That kind of thing.

Sanovia Jones: I was about 28, maybe. I had three children. My youngest was ... I moved there March the 1st, couple days later he would turn four.

I saw a lot, dealt with a lot, went through a lot. But I thought, "Remain positive and strong." I'm just trying to think.

I was there eight years. In those eight years, I would end up getting married, and moving my family out of the Gardens. We were still under housing, but we moved to a subdivision, and was working towards buying.

Cynthia Hardy: Okay. Part of the reason for doing these oral history project is to talk to people about their family life, and get some idea from you about what you hope to see will go on that location.

Sanovia Jones: Okay. Well, in my building, I had a couple older people. There were a couple younger ones, but we were close-knit. Some of the women were a mom away from Mom. Advice, or something we needed, some of the mothers that would step in and be mothers for us. So, we were close-knit in my building.

We had a lot of opportunities, not everybody took advantage of them, but we did. And I don't like to see more housing development, because some of us wanted to buy houses, and they were preparing us to try and save, and mold us, offering us classes, as far as trying to buy. Excuse me. My voice is a little hoarse. But I would like to see affordable housing go back up where people can own their own home.

Cynthia Hardy: That's a really good thing that you're saying. It's true. When we have the opportunity to own a house, it changes our life.

Sanovia Jones: Right.

People should have that opportunity easier. And the housing right now, the housing market in general, it's just not available. Affordable housing, whether it's under Columbia Housing, or anywhere. It's hard, in many ways. It's just hard for people who qualify for housing, and also for people who are just in the open market, looking for a decent affordable place to live.

And so, in so many ways, the fact that we have that, and have had that, is a blessing within itself, I would imagine.

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cynthia Hardy: But you kept mentioning opportunities. Why do you keep mentioning opportunities?

Sanovia Jones: Because I was one of those people that was given an opportunity, and I took it, and I took advantage of it. When I moved in the Gardens, I didn't have my high school diploma. Didn't graduate in '97 ... I mean, they let me graduate, but I didn't have my diploma. So, I was cheating myself. How am I telling my kids, "You all need to graduate. You need your high school diploma," when I didn't even have mine?

So, I went and talked to my FSS case manager, told him I wanted to go back to school, and so instead of getting my GED, I was able to go back and get my diploma. I didn't have a car. There was days I walked from Gonzales Gardens because of it. They would give me bus tickets, but I had to get the kids ready for school. So, sometimes the bus didn't work. So, I would walk from [Farm 00:05:09] Drive to [inaudible 00:05:10] Company, to go to school.

Cynthia Hardy: Wow.

Sanovia Jones: [crosstalk 00:05:14] rain, sometimes it was raining, sometimes I was cold. Sleet, sometimes ice. But I did it. Had a son that has a kidney disease. Sometimes I would leave him at the hospital, and I would go to school, and come back and be with him at the hospital.

After I got my high school diploma, I was able to take college classes. So, I got my CNA license, cardiac care, EKG, and phlebotomy. I was able to get those classes through Housing Authority.

They found sponsors, and I was able to get those classes, and I was able to go in the work field and obtain a decent job.

So, once I got married, I went and talked to her, I said ... Of course, I was making better than the money, because better than anybody, I wouldn't be here with you all. But I wanted more for my kids. So, I went and talked to my FSS case manager, and she said, "Well, write a letter to Mr. Walker stating why you want to move."

And I just pretty much wrote the letter and told them why I wanted to move, and why I thought I'd be a good fit to leave the project and move to a house. And I think maybe less than 44 hours, they were telling me, "Okay, you got approved. You got to be out of here in three days." I didn't have time to pack anything, because they approved it so fast.

Cynthia Hardy: Were you happy?

Sanovia Jones: Oh, I was so happy. I was so happy. It's a place to start and get on your feet, but it's not a place you want to stay. And it's not a place that you want to raise your kids. You want better for your kids.

Cynthia Hardy: I get it.

Sanovia Jones: And so, I worked my tail off, and me and my husband got them up out of there. You don't walk out the door and see the concrete, or more buildings, if I'm able to walk outside and see grass, and other houses.

So, I moved, and that's when I moved to Starlight. And I was still under housing, but now I'm working towards buying a house. So, those are some of the opportunities that I was given. And they're given to everybody. It is up to you whether or not you want to take them.

Cynthia Hardy: Wow. That's very inspirational. Tell me about your kids.

Sanovia Jones: I have a daughter that's 22, she works at Three Rivers with children, the behavior [inaudible 00:07:26] center. I have a son that's 20, he's in the US Army. He's married. He married his middle school sweetheart.

I have a 17-year-old son. That's my son that has the health issues, but every day he keep moving forward. It's a struggle, but he make the best of it. It doesn't complain, he doesn't whine, he just make the best of his situation.

Cynthia Hardy: Good.

Sanovia Jones: And I have a nine-year-old, and she's in Fourth Grade.

Cynthia Hardy: Oh, my. So, how are you dealing with the COVID situation? You good?

Sanovia Jones: I'm dealing with it. I don't really too much go out, because I'm scared. Because we already had COVID. A family member gave ... Must be about 14 or 15 of us caught it at one time. So, I don't go out unless necessary. Doctor's appointments, grocery store. And I never stop wearing my mask. We never stop wearing our mask, because we knew if my son ever got COVID, the doctor said it will probably do him really bad.

But in actuality, it pushed him in remission. So, it did the opposite of what we thought. So, that was a blessing. So, I don't take advantage of it. I just stay out the way.

Cynthia Hardy: That sounds like a very positive outlook. Very positive outlook.

Cynthia Hardy: So, you had children that went to school while you lived in the Gardens. How did that [crosstalk 00:08:53]

Sanovia Jones: Oh, Yes, ma'am.

Cynthia Hardy: How did that go?

Sanovia Jones: Oh ... I was that mother that was at the bus stop, waiting for them to get off the bus, because it's going to be somebody that's want to fight, or it may not even be the kids, it may be grownups that's fighting, or acting a fool. And so, I was always going to the bus stop to meet my kids.

They didn't have much of an outside life in the Gardens, because I was afraid. Because what we went through. And we called it "The Concrete Jungle." Every day was a survival. And so, when I did let them out, I was out with them. We was outside. We sit on the porch. We'll go in.

Most times I went to my mama house, because she stayed in the country, so we would go to her house. Because she kept telling me, "They're not going to grow if you keep them locked up in the house." And so, I started letting them out a little bit more.

But as far as school, they did very well in school. It's just, the hardships that was around us.

Cynthia Hardy: I understand. Did they play any sports, or anything like that? Any extracurricular activities or anything?

Sanovia Jones: No. My daughter was more of a loner. She just wasn't really a people person. She had a few friends that came over, and stay the weekends.

My son, he was active in ROTC. He knew since age four he wanted to be a soldier. So, he was mostly active in ROTC, did a lot of community service, a lot of volunteering.

And the one that's 17, he's been homeschooled a lot, home-bound. So, he didn't get a full experience of school like the other two did.

Cynthia Hardy: I got you. So, do you handle the homeschooling yourself?

Sanovia Jones: At first he was home-bound, but now ... He made it to Creighton, and he started having seizures repeatedly, he hit his head, and so the doctor decided school is not for him. I'm his learner coach. He does very well.

His teachers, just like [inaudible 00:10:55], she goes on the screen and she teaches him. And he does very well. He's doing very well. But I am the learner coach, so you have to play a big part in it.

Cynthia Hardy: You sound like a very strong person. Where does your strength come from?

Sanovia Jones: My grandmother. And it's hard when you say that, because I was wondering if you was going to ask about my husband, if we're still together. And that's going to bring you to my strength. My husband was murdered three years ago.

Cynthia Hardy: Oh, no.

Sanovia Jones: So, it's just me and the kids. I have no choice but to be strong. Because if I'm weak and I fail, I fail my kids.

Cynthia Hardy: My goodness.

So, I [inaudible 00:11:32] for them.

Cynthia Hardy: Just the little things that you describe ... Because we don't always live where we want to live, but we still have jobs to do. We have still have stuff we have to do.

Sanovia Jones: And I ended up in the Gardens from a beautiful relationship from my older kid's father. The day that we were supposed to do a closing call on a house, they called me from Gonzales Gardens. Ms. Sheila had called me, and said, "We have an apartment for you. Bring me \$50.00 and you can get your house key and your mailbox key."

And I called my mom and I said, "Mom, I got an apartment in the Gardens." She said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I'm going to take it." Because I don't care about living in the Gardens. I just wanted to be happy, and not be miserable. And so, that's how I ended up in the Gardens.

I left an abusive situation, where I had everything. But I gave it all up for sanity, and for my kids.

Cynthia Hardy: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I get that. I do. I really do. But the way that you describe being very protective of them, knowing that we can teach our children, or we can let the environment teach our children.

Sanovia Jones: Right. And they were not going to be a part of the latter environment. I refuse.

So, you decided. And also, the message that it sends to somebody who's looking, and to the kids, and you decide, "I'm going to meet my kids at the bus."

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cynthia Hardy: "[inaudible 00:12:54] kids when they get off the school bus. I'm going to meet them. They know to look for me." And I'm sure they get a sense of security.

Cynthia Hardy: I can't tell you the number of kids that I've worked with over the years, that trip on that bus in the morning, that trip on that bus coming back, that's where the fights would happen, that's where feelings would get hurt. Just so many things happen in that period. I get that. I understand exactly what you're saying. I'm sure it made the kids feel real good about it too.

So, tell me about your husband. Because that had to have been extremely traumatic for you. Especially ... Once you decide to marry somebody, we just feel like, "Wow, this is it." And to have that taken away, I know that was very, very difficult.

Sanovia Jones: Yeah. My husband was a hard worker. He worked for the City of Columbia. When I met him, I was actually in school getting my high school diploma. He was actually my Math tutor. He start teaching me, helped me with my Math, and we just start growing on each other.

I told him, "Well, I live in the projects." He was like, "I don't care about that. I don't care nothing about that." He's like, "When you love somebody, you don't see where they come from, or where they live at. You love them for them."

So, we just dated for seven months, and then as of eight months, he asked me to marry him. And decided to get married, and I said, "Why so soon?" And so, I was like, "When do you want to get married?" He was like, "Let's just pick a date out of the hat." And we picked the date, which was the very next year. We picked the date in December of 2010, we got married in July of 2011.

And I said, "Well, why so soon?" He said, "Well, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out, if you love somebody, you want to spend the rest of your life with them." And he always would say, "You're so strong. You're so strong." And I was ... I don't know, that's how I was just raised. I was built strong.

We had a good life. Things was looking up to us. We was looking to buy, because by now we were in Starlight, now in Monroe, and now we're meeting with Housing, and we're trying to get ourself together so we could buy a house, one of the houses in the Gonzales Gardens. Because I wanted to go back. The kids was familiar with the area, the schools, and so I was going to go back. And we didn't ever make it that far.

He end up getting murdered. We met them on Wednesday, he end up getting murdered on Saturday.

Cynthia Hardy: Wow.

Sanovia Jones: And so, after he was murdered, they asked if we still want to go forward with buying the house. I told them no, because that was something we picked out together, and it just wasn't right to me. But I end up buying a house.

He told me, "If something happen to me, make sure you buy my kids a house, so they'll have something." And so, I did end up buying a house. But I still want to buy another house, because the house I have, I always say to people, "It's a blessing, and it's a curse." It's a blessing that I have my house, I don't have a mortgage, but it's a curse on how I got the house."

And so, I feel like I cheated myself, so I still want to buy a house. I still want to go through credit and financing, I still want to buy a house. And so, that's what I'm working on now.

Cynthia Hardy: Okay. So, you're working on buying your second home?

Sanovia Jones: Yeah. My son is in the Army. He called me up about three weeks ago. He asked me, was I still going to buy a house, and he said, "Well Mom, let's just buy some land, and we'll get a house built." So, that's what we're working on.

That's wonderful. That's wonderful. So, are you from this area? Is this your home?

Sanovia Jones: Yes, ma'am. I was raised ... And I wasn't really no stranger to the projects, because I was raised in Henley Homes, and then I moved with my grandparents. But I am from Columbia.

Okay. And what difference did it make in your life once you went back and got those degrees and stuff?

Cynthia Hardy: My sister's a nurse now, but I remember when she became a CNA, and how proud she was. And then, my best friend's sister Kitty is a CNA. And I remember we started having sickness in the family, and how helpful she was, of the knowledge that the CNAs have. Nothing beats a good CNA. Nothing.

Sanovia Jones: I get that a lot. And when somebody's sick in the family, they'll call. "Hey." Sometimes I could call, and sometimes I'm like, "I don't know. You might to go to the doctor."



I'm in school now. I decided to change my career, because being a CNA, it's hard, and it grounds you. It grounds you for structure. It's like the Gardens. It gives you structure. So, when I became a CNA, I worked on the hardest floor at Palmetto Health Richland, which was Seven West. It's called Nephrology. But we called it "Wild Wild West."

Cynthia Hardy: Oh, wow.

Sanovia Jones: Yeah. When I applied for a job in the hospital, I applied for Nephrology, because I knew my son had a kidney disease. So, I really want to get on that floor to learn as much as I could about the kidneys, and I did.

Cynthia Hardy: That's awesome.

Sanovia Jones: There would be days I would have eight, nine patients, 12 patients. Sometimes I'd be the only tech on the floor. I'd have to turn all these patients. By the time I turn all these patients, clean them up, get them dressed, it's time to start all over again.

[crosstalk 00:18:35]

Because you have to turn them every two hours. So, it was hard. And it gave me a lot of structure.

I got out of being a CNA. I still ... Because I do home health now, but I was getting classmates that was dying on me, and younger people that I grew up with. It would start to take a toll on me.

Cynthia Hardy: Sure. I get that too. I understand. So, in terms of ... Hang on one second.

Cynthia Hardy: Now, tell me what it's like to have a little one in the house like that.

Sanovia Jones: Oh ... She keep us on our feet. It's so hard. Because I have 22, 20, and 17, and then I have a nine-year-old who's more needy. So, a lot of my attention has to go to her, versus I have 17-year-old who has a kidney disease. Plus, I'm in online school.

So, my life is hectic. But I make the best of it. But having that little one, she keeps me grounded. That's the one that's from my husband. And she tells me a lot, if I get sad or down ... She used to call her daddy "Babe," because he used to call me Babe. So, she'll say, "Mama, don't cry, because that's not what Babe wants. Babe wants you to just go on with your life." So, she keep me going.

Cynthia Hardy: She sounds delightful.

Sanovia Jones: She is.

Cynthia Hardy: How is she doing with COVID, and school and stuff?

Sanovia Jones: Oh, I'm glad you asked me that. That baby is COVID crazy.

Really?

Sanovia Jones: When I tell you that wherever we go, "Uh-uh (negative), Mama. You got your mask? You got your sanitizer?" Even when we're in the grocery store, she run over there, she getting the sanitized wipe. And my older daughter's like, "What are you doing?" She goes, "Uh-uh (negative). People might have COVID. They could have been coughing all over this buggy." She don't play. She wear two masks to school. She don't play. She says, "I don't care what they say. I'm going to wear my mask. I'm not getting COVID again." Because we had it the first time. And so, she don't ...

And she was so ready to go back to school, because she was missing her friends and stuff. But the third day of school she was like, "Mama, I can't deal." And it's kind of my fault, because I told her, "You keep that mask on, and you think of if everybody got COVID." So, now she's like, "People cough and sneeze," and I keep telling her, "No, they don't have COVID per se. You just think that so you can remember to wear your mask."

So, she's looking at people sideways, like they got COVID. But she handles it very well.

Cynthia Hardy: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, is there anything else that you want to add to the interview about your time in the Gardens, and what you would recommend to people, as we look at rebuilding on that site, and we look at creating a sense of community, similar to what you said you had in your building with the other women, where the women who mentored you, plus the women that you mentored, being able to trade information, and things like that. It sometimes can make the difference in the quality of the life that you have there.

Sanovia Jones: Oh, yeah.

Cynthia Hardy: I was wondering if there was anything that you wanted to add to that, anything that you wanted to say as the developers look and determine what they want to put there?

Sanovia Jones: I think a small, maybe a cottage, or a community, would be good. My time in the Gardens was hard. I've seen people fight, I've seen them get shot. I've seen somebody get shot to death. I've seen a lot.

My advice to anybody who has to move to anything project-based, just look at it as temporary. It doesn't stop here. It's not where you're from, it's where you're going. Once you get there, don't get comfortable.

Anything that they offer you and it's free, take it, take advantage of it, and move forward. If I can do it, anybody can do it.

Cynthia Hardy: Thank you so much.