

Maurice Johnson bought his two-bedroom house after sacrificing a roof over his head for more than a year.

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Maurice Johnson isn't a millionaire, but his two plastic deer statues may as well be gold-gilded figurines. Perched in his front yard, the deer stand before something more valuable to Johnson than gold -- his home.

Formerly homeless, Johnson spent many nights in his car and at the Rescue Mission of Roanoke. Through a loan from USDA's Rural Development program, he now owns the house he calls home.

"I just love it out here," he said of his Roanoke County house, which is located near Boones Mill. "Everything worked together for good."

Tough times

Johnson, 50, arrived in Roanoke in fall 2003 with a tankful of gasoline in his car and \$20 in his pocket. He'd moved from Richmond at the suggestion of a friend in Roanoke and hoped for a better life.

With no money and no job, Johnson went straight to the Rescue Mission. Soon, he started work at the Holiday Inn Airport, but he was unable to afford a place of his own.

Johnson's job yielded enough money for him to rent a house. A second job in banquet services at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center provided Johnson with more income, but he was exhausted and frustrated that he was pouring most of this money into rent payments.

"I knew God hadn't sent me to rent for the rest of my life," he said.

To save money, Johnson moved out when his lease expired. After putting some of his belongings in a storage facility, he started life as a homeless man. Johnson slept where he could -- in vacant hotel rooms, in a chair at the Rescue Mission. On cold nights, he'd blast the heat in his car, then turn the engine off and curl up under blankets. Though he didn't intend for his homelessness to be a long-term situation, Johnson lived this way for a year and four months.

"It was really hard on him," said Linda Bannister, the friend who'd encouraged Johnson to move to Roanoke, "but he persevered."

Johnson said he prayed about finding a home and felt the Lord guided him.

He got a book of grants and began searching for a way to fund a house. Last fall, one of the foundations he'd contacted put him in touch with Rural Development, a federal program that supports increasing economic opportunity to improve the quality of life for residents in rural areas.

Johnson subsequently filed an application for a housing loan with Rural Development. Loans such as the one Johnson received are available to low-income individuals or families who have a stable and dependable income. After Johnson's application was reviewed, he began the process of searching for a house.

House hunting

Thrilled with the possibility of becoming a homeowner, Johnson armed himself with real estate pamphlets and magazines last fall. He met with a realtor and found a home in Roanoke County that he liked. It quickly sold to someone else, however, so he was forced to continue searching.

"It kind of vexed my spirits," he said.

In retrospect, Johnson believes he didn't get the house because something better was in store for him. He first looked at a white house in January that he eventually bought in April and prayed for wisdom to know what to do. The house had been on the market for more than a year, and Johnson felt it was waiting for him. He fell in love with the mountains that surround the house, and even the plastic deer were a selling point -- they made the place unique, he said.

"This is going to be the house for real," he recalled thinking. "I can deal with this."

Before Johnson could go ahead with purchasing the house, Vanessa Ingles, a rural development specialist who works in Christiansburg, inspected it to make sure it was "safe, modest and secure," which are requirements for a Rural Development housing loan. After the seller made some repairs, the \$90,900 house was approved and Johnson closed on it April 15. Rural Development can make loans for up to \$156,700 in Roanoke County, depending on the number of people in a household.

Ingles described Johnson's situation as a "rags to riches" story. Her office rarely, if ever, sees people move straight from homelessness to home ownership, she said. Ingles added that his story is especially timely because he moved in just before June, which is National Home Ownership month.

"He did it," Bannister said of Johnson, "and he showed through sacrifice and hard work you can do it."

Bannister, who works at Holiday Inn Airport, said having his own house has given Johnson peace. She's happy "he's risen above it all." Now she hopes he'll find something else: a wife.

Settling in

With the exception of a cage for his two lovebirds, Johnson's house is furnished with items from thrift stores. He sewed the pink curtains in his kitchen by himself and converted an old clothes rack into a plant stand.

His two-bedroom, one-bathroom house has an eat-in kitchen and an unfinished basement. One part of the house that Johnson paid special attention to is his prayer room, which contains bright red tables and black and gold curtains. Johnson keeps photos of his daughter, Nakiea, of Richmond, and his godchildren in the room, where he prays in the early mornings before he begins his 5 a.m. shift at Hotel Roanoke. He has since quit his Holiday Inn job.

From his prayer room, Johnson can look out the window and stare directly at the mountains, a vista much different from his previous view of a steering wheel and a glove compartment. Johnson hopes to eventually convert his basement into a church, ministering to homeless and fatherless people.

For now, he's busy making a few last-minute repairs and putting the finishing touches on his house. This may entail spider-proofing his bedroom, but it's a far easier task for Johnson than searching for a place to sleep each night. He still works long shifts, but said he knows the Lord will help him through any tribulations he faces. And it doesn't hurt that Johnson's confidence is bolstered by owning a home.

"It's the best thing in the world," he said.

Local Rural Development offices are located in Christiansburg (540-382-0267), Rocky Mount (483-5341) and Lexington (540-463-7124). On the Web: www.rurdev.usda.gov/va.