KEY CONVERSATIONS

What if hope was hiding behind a taco run?

Interview By Taryne Gordon, Director of Marketing and Brand Management at DreamKey Partners. Photographed by Albright Photography



IT WAS A warm spring afternoon in Riverdale, Georgia, and the grand opening celebration at Hearthside Riverdale was winding down when Sandra Little caught my eye. At 74, Sandra had a presence that was impossible to miss. Her silver curls bounced as she smiled, and her eyes widened with recognition.

"You're here for me?" Joy filled her voice. We slipped into the theater room for a quiet conversation. Sandra settled into her chair and looked around the community she now calls home. For more than a decade, she'd lived in a single room.

Taryne Gordon: What has your housing journey been like?

Sandra Little: Well… my housing journey has been horrific. I was going through a bad marriage. Full of physical abuse. Then, I left the marriage but I didn't have a place to stay. But, I managed to stay in a room house. One vehicle. One room. For 13 years.

TG: That must have been difficult. I'm so sorry you went through that. What made you want to make a change?

SL: My son said, Mom, I don't like you living like this. It's rough on me to see you like this. So, I began my search.

TG: That's a good son, looking out for his mama! So, as you were saying, you started your search for an apartment.

SL: Yes, I was going to senior apartments, but none were available. They would tell me, you don't qualify. You don't have any small children. And you don't make enough money. And I almost threw in the towel, but Ms. Thurman from the Clayton County Aging Department threw the towel back at me. You're not gonna give up? No. We gonna walk this journey together. She sat down and listened to me, and what Sandra really needed.

Clayton County Senior Services' Aging Program assists seniors with their needs, including housing, transportation, meals, and care services, all aimed at helping them live safely and independently.

TG: How did you get to Hearthside Riverdale? What was the process like?

SL: So, one day I needed, or wanted a Del Taco. And, you know, it's right here [close proximity to Hearthside Riverdale]. But it was boarded up. I looked across the street, and I wondered what they were building over there. And I said, Zari [Sandra's son, Azari], go across the street. I'm gonna talk to one of the construction people. I'll just take a minute. Zari took me and I said, excuse me, sir. Excuse me. He said, Hey, good morning. Um, I said, um, what is this you're building? He said, it's for you.

The construction worker told Sandra to call the number for the Hearthside Jonesburg location to talk to someone. Sandra was so grateful and called the number right away, where she spoke to Nateisha Whaley, Assistant Manager at Hearthside Jonesburg and Riverdale.

At that moment, Sandra covered her face with both hands to keep back her tears. Even now, months later, the memory of that phone call still felt surreal.

SL: I didn't want a taco. I wasn't going nowhere else but to Ms. Nateisha. I asked Zari if he had anything to do. He said, mother, yes, we're going!

For the first time in our conversation, Sandra's entire face lit up. The obstacles, waiting lists, and disappointments faded away as she described what happened next. Ms. Abria Moss, Community Manager at Hearthside Riverdale and Jonesburg, offered to walk Sandra through each page of the application. Sandra felt seen, heard, and supported by the Hearthside staff. Her voice cracked as tears filled her eyes again.

SL: Ms. Moss told me I have to believe. She said, now go and let me do my thing. You will be approved. I said to myself, just believe that's all. And then the phone rang. She asked am I sitting down? And I thought, oh no here we go. But she said, I need for you to tell me what day you come in and pick up your keys. And she said, Hello? She said, Miss Little. I said, Abria would you please say that again? [breaks out in laughter] I said, Thank you, Jesus. I just started hollering, thank you!

Sandra immediately called her son.

"Zari, I got an apartment." He paused before replying, "Ma, you don't play games, so I know you're not lying to me." When he arrived, he wrapped his arms around her and said, "I told you not to give up."

TG: You didn't give up! And now you're here [Hearthside Riverdale].

SL: I love it here! I want the place to stay like this. This is where I live. This is where I want it to be, like, five, six, seven, eight, years down the road. We ain't used to having nothing like this. I'm being truthful. In all of my 74 years!

Sandra leaned back in her chair and smiled.

"Somebody helped me. Okay, I want to pass it on. Because that's how God brings down your blessings."

After a journey she describes as "rough" and "horrific," Sandra finally has a place to call her own. Not a room. Not a temporary stop. A place where she feels safe, secure, and free to simply live. For years, Sandra was searching for housing. What she found at Hearthside Riverdale goes beyond her apartment. She found independence, peace of mind, and the comfort of knowing she's home.

Opposite: Sandra Little in the Hearthside Riverdale shared community space. Below: Sandra relaxes in the barbeque area.

