

## Changing Lives. Together.

# Tonya's Journey

Shelter. Safety. Stability.

Three words that sound simple — until you've lived without them.

This is the story of our mission through one woman's journey: Tonya, a nurse, a daughter, a woman who lost everything and found her way back. Her story moves through our three pillars —  
Shelter, a place to rest and heal.  
Safety, care and support.  
Stability, a place to place to call home.

Her journey was made possible by the community that walked alongside her.

“ *When you support The Sophia Way, you make stories like mine possible — not just for me, but for so many other women. What you give matters to us. And in the end, we all win.*

— Tonya

# A Sense of Belonging

I had been a nurse for years, and I loved it, taking care of others. Then my mom passed away, and grief shattered me. The panic attacks came first. Then the physical pain that made it impossible to work. I went on disability. And then, slowly, I lost everything. My savings. My apartment. I lived in my car, until I lost that as well.

Being in that spiral is like quicksand. You're stuck and you can't get out. You're trying to hold on, to grab something – anything. But whatever you do, you can't get out. And you think: what am I going to do now?

I ended up in the hospital, depressed, hopeless, feeling like no one in the world cared. Then everything changed.

I was discharged to The Sophia Way's Resource Center, and met an angel. That's what I call her – the staff member who called Helen's Place and asked them to hold a bed for me. I went from the hospital to a warm bed that same night.

Helen's Place wasn't just somewhere to lay your head. It was three meals a day. A shower. Clean laundry. A community room where you could be with people. A private sleeping space where you could rest. It was a sense of belonging, something I hadn't felt in a very long time.

I had a place to call my temporary home. And for the first time in years, I wasn't alone.



*Helen's Place wasn't just somewhere to lay your head. It was a sense of belonging, something I hadn't felt in a very long time.*

## Community Makes Shelter Possible

Every meal served, every donated coat sorted, every Shelter Assistant volunteering in the kitchen – community members give dignity and make the shelter experience welcoming. In 2025, volunteers contributed 5,240 hours of service, and donated goods worth \$375,981 kept our shelves and closets stocked year-round.



# My Fuzzy Buddies

I called my case managers and shelter staff my “fuzzy buddies.” It’s the only way I know how to describe it — that feeling of having a cushion that is warm and safe when everything around you is uncertain.

They gave me comfort and consistency. They weren’t just doing a job. They saw me. They saw that I was smart and capable. And on the days I could barely see myself, that mattered more than I can say.

Helen’s Place is a program, and it works if you work with it. And I did. I set goals. I continued therapy. I met my case manager every week. She never let me feel like I was facing any of it alone. She was there for every small step forward and every setback. The whole staff was like that.

They took care of me physically, mentally, emotionally, even socially. There were community brunches, music, yoga — moments of joy I hadn’t let myself feel in years. When you’ve been in survival mode for so long, being in a room full of people who are feeding you, celebrating you, and treating you with dignity — it tells you something. It tells you that you matter. That you’re worth showing up for.

Being at Helen’s Place really revolutionized my life. I said it then, and I still mean it.

I began to see a future for myself. I began working toward a master’s degree in nursing informatics. I started looking for places to rent. That happened because my fuzzy buddies showed up for me, every single day, until I could start showing up for myself.

*They saw me. And on the days I could barely see myself, that mattered more than I can say.*

## Community Creates Safety

Twice a year — in summer and fall — community donors and volunteers host Community Brunches: joyful, welcoming gatherings created especially for the women in all of The Sophia Way’s programs. More than 120 women come together to connect, build friendships, and experience a morning filled with dignity and delight. They meet and mingle, “shop” donated items, and enjoy haircuts and makeovers that help them feel confident and celebrated. Volunteers also organize heartfelt celebrations for Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and other meaningful occasions, ensuring every woman feels seen, valued, and part of a community.

# I Feel Whole

In October 2024, I got an email.

‘Tonya, you can come sign your lease in the morning.’

After years of losing everything – my mother, my health, my home, my car, my confidence – I was getting something back. I was so excited.

It was a release I hadn’t felt in years: of worry, of exhaustion, of the weight I’d been carrying for so long. I can put that behind me, I told myself. And start to focus on what’s next.

My case manager had helped me get here. Now it was up to me.

And what happened next was so wonderful. In spring 2025, I was hired as a nursing manager. Being back, being a smiling face in someone else’s day, caring for others again, it filled something in me I thought I’d lost.

There are still days when I struggle. I’m still in therapy. Still moving forward. Still in touch with my fuzzy buddies.

But I feel whole. And I am grateful – to every staff member, every case manager, and every person in this community who believed that what they gave could change a life.

It changed mine.

*P.S. In November, I shared my story at The Sophia Way's annual fundraiser, Coming Home in front of 250 people. I was so nervous, but my fuzzy buddies were there, giving me courage. When everyone rose to applaud, I felt seen, heard, celebrated, and overwhelmed with joy!*



*I am grateful to everyone who believed that what they gave could change a life.*

## Community Builds Stability

When women like Tonya move into their first home, they don’t start from nothing. Community donors provide Welcome Home Baskets filled with everyday essentials. And case managers help them make the apartment a home. Donations to the Client Assistance Fund directly cover application fees, deposits, and first-month rent – removing the final barriers between a woman and the key to her own front door. In 2025, the fund provided \$197,951 in direct support to women, including \$80,776 for move-in costs.