

FORMER SHELTER RESIDENT RETURNS TO COOK FOR HOMELESS

# Serving up meals with extra sides of gratitude

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Residents at the Brisben Center emergency homeless shelter in Frederickburg know that when Januari Coates is cooking, dinner might be served a little late.

"I'll apologize and they'll say, 'It's OK, Januari, we know cooking with loves takes time!'" said Coates, 41.

The Woodbridge resident cooks at the shelter at least once a week and her goal is to serve up the comforts of home along with the meals.

"Someone was willing to buy me fried chicken [to serve

at dinner]," Coates said. "I said, 'Do you know how much better it would be for them to smell the chicken frying than for someone to just drop off some KFC?'"

"People are stressed when they're in a shelter and they can't cook for themselves," she continued. "So I provide the USDA meals, but also make things they would have when they're at home.

"I see it as art on a plate."

Coates, who works as a real estate agent and broker in Washington, Maryland and Virginia—she sold her

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first million-dollar property last year—knows how shelter residents feel because she used to be one herself. She lived at the Brisben Center for two weeks when she was 19.

“I would say I was a rebellious child,” she said. “I was pregnant and I had a child and my mom was just being a mom, but I didn’t want to do things her way. She dropped me off at Brisben one night.”

Coates said staff at the center helped her get back on track by supporting her as she attained the goals she set for herself.

“I was not a ‘homeless person’ to them,” she said. “I was a young woman, certainly troubled, but with the capability and drive to make it on my own. They did not coddle me. They guided and challenged me to reach for goals that would make me proud of myself.”

Coates took classes at Germanna and passed her GED. She got a job at Marian Manor, an assisted living facility in Stafford, and an apartment.

“I called my mom one day and said, ‘Come over to my house,’ ” Coates recalled. “She said, ‘You don’t have a house. You live at the shelter.’ And I said, ‘Yes, I do have a house.’ ”

While Coates was living at the Brisben Center, she started volunteering to cook meals.

“I really loved it,” she said. “And I always used to say, one day, I’m going to come back and I’m going to cook for people.”

Coates learned the importance of giving back from her mom, Debra Samuels.

“My grandmother taught us that,” Samuels said. “She’d always say, ‘You take care of God’s children and God will take care of you.’ And she meant that. She instilled that in us, to always give back to the community. She taught us to go to nursing homes, back in the ‘60s, to read to the residents and things like that.”

Samuels said she has had “ups and downs” in her life and was on government assistance at times, so giving back once she was in a position to do so became even more important.

She’s purchased food from the food bank to distribute in local communities, donated clothes to children living in group homes, provided sandwiches, water and warm socks the unsheltered homeless population and

sponsored Fredericksburg City school children at Christmastime.

“We’re supposed to give what we got,” Samuels said.

After Coates moved out of the Brisben Center, she worked in sales and then became the office manager at a real estate appraisal company.

In 2013, she got her real estate license and started putting a portion of each commission check towards feeding children and families in need.

She serves meals regularly to homeless youth in Washington, and ran a pop-up food pantry in the Mayfield neighborhood in Fredericksburg.

“Every two weeks, I would feed 30 to 50 families there,” Coates said. “They would come to the community center and pick up food from me.”

After one of the Mayfield pantry days, she had a lot of uncooked chicken left over and didn’t know what to do with it.

“I called Brisben and they told me I could leave it there and come back the next day and cook it,” Coates said. “So I did. And after that, it turned into once a month and then once a week and then whenever they needed me.”

In June, the Brisben Center’s volunteer coordinator, Joe Hargrove, suffered a stroke. While he recuperated, Coates stepped in to make sure the shelter residents and those who were rehoused elsewhere during the COVID-19 pandemic received daily meals.

Because the pandemic has meant fewer volunteers are able to come into the building, Coates has provided many of the meals herself.

“In October, I did 20 days by myself,” she said.

Coates said she spends about \$1,000 a month on feeding the homeless and the housing insecure.

Her goal last year was to feed 2,000 people. When she realized at the end of the year that she had served 12,000 people, she decided her goal for 2020 would be to feed 24,000.

As she cooks and serves meals—with the help of her family, including her mother, children and nieces—Coates also listens to and advocates for shelter residents.

“I connect through feeding,” she said.

She’s passionate about fighting misconceptions people have about those living in shelters and transitional housing.

“The biggest misconception for me is that they don’t work,” Coates said. “Some of the people I talk to have two jobs. I’ve seen where I cook breakfast at six in the morning for an employee who got off at 4 a.m. One guy, his wife became mentally ill and he had to cut his hours. I meet people from all walks of life.”

Coates also provides meals to people who live in area hotels and motels. Many have evictions on their credit report that prevent them from being able to rent another apartment, or are not able to find a unit within their price range locally.

“What do we do as a community when there is really no affordable housing?” she said. “With COVID, if the essential workers are your convenience store employees and your restaurant employees and they live in those hotels—how do we improve their quality of life if that’s what they go back to after they’ve made sure they’ve made America go around? Just imagine if we had more transitional housing, more affordable dwelling units.”

Coates said those who experience a housing crisis won’t go back to the situation that led to the crisis once they can figure out what it was.

“If people know what got them where they are, they won’t go there again,” she said. “But a lot of the time, people can’t identify it. There’s so much turmoil, they can’t see the bigger picture. In my opinion, there has to be a bridge between that and getting the housing that they need.”

Coates is grateful that the Brisben Center provided her with that bridge 22 years ago and she is thankful that she is in a position now to help the organization that helped her.

“People tell me I’ll be blessed [for what I do,]” she said. “But I don’t have to wait for the blessing. The blessing is that God allowed me to be in a position where I can do this. This is my why.”