

"WE'RE BUILDING OUR POWER!"



**2019 STORIES
OF IMPACT AND ACTION**
DOWN HOME NC | December 2019



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INTRODUCTION

What an incredible year at Down Home.

This year, our members created new tools designed to build power for poor and working folks in North Carolina. On these pages, you'll meet some of these members and volunteers. While the stories are unique to the authors, they are typical of the high caliber work done by Down Home members in local chapters across the state. We look forward to sharing their stories with you.

Here's a quick preview: Access to affordable healthcare remains a top priority for our members, and this was a watershed year in the fight to expand Medicaid. Our members were at the center of the action, and more than 1500 people joined together to push for Medicaid expansion in 2019. They held [town halls](#), wrote [letters](#), participated in a [statewide vigil](#), went door-to-door, and [were present](#) when Governor Cooper stood with working people and vetoed the state budget. On [page 4](#), **Lynne Price Pierce** shares what it's like to live without health coverage in *The Grassroots Fight for Medicaid Expansion* and tells state representatives what they should do to fix it. The push to expand Medicaid expansion will continue in 2020, and our members will continue to pressure our leaders to do the right thing. **Trevor Mark Gates** encourages other members to join him in holding elected leaders accountable on issues like Medicaid expansion and shares his tips for success in *Bird-Dogging in Three Steps* on [page 5](#).

Canvassing is another way our members speak truth to power. From September through November, members in Alamance County held over 1,000 conversations with voters, using their own stories to build solidarity around

immigration and the healthcare. Read insights on the groundbreaking race-class narrative canvass experiment in a Q&A with members **Sugelema Lynch** and **Mahsima Hallaji** on [page 6](#). Also in Alamance, members created and raised nearly \$16,000 for a [Community Bail Fund](#) to fight the unjust system of cash bail. The same group also began a member-led court monitoring program, and you can read about it in *Court Watching in Alamance County* by **Lisa Rowden**, **Lorraine Werts**, and **Debbie Smith** on [page 7](#).

Many of our members were excited to vote in their local races this year because, for the first time, they felt like they could make an informed decision. Several also expressed their desire to run for office. This spring, organizer and [Movement School Fellow](#) **Kischa Peña** coordinated a group of our members and staff to travel to DC to attend Black Campaign School, a program that trains Black leaders to run and win campaigns in 2020 and beyond. In *Lessons from Black Campaign School*, you can read about what **Dreama Caldwell** learned, and what she plans to do next on [page 8](#).

This year's Municipal Elections also represented significant gains for Down Home's members as six of eight endorsed candidates won their races. Successes include both Board of Alderman seats in **Waynesville**, which we can be proud knowing our members contributed to these historic [wins](#); in **Mebane** a victory for the endorsed incumbent on City Council member and the strategic support of another candidate to prepare for future races; in **Burlington**, members organized a town hall where the incumbent Mayor publicly committed to work with Down Home on our campaign to reform cash bail and initiated a meeting between our members and the Chief of Police to shape "cite and release" in lieu of arrest policies. Our members endorsed

him, saw him through his primary, and celebrated his reelection. Finally, for Town Council in **Sylva**, our members endorsed two incumbents and one first-time candidate **Carrie McBane**. The two incumbents were reelected, and Carrie's race ended in a tie at 108 votes. The flip of a coin (literally!) decided the seat, and while the toss didn't go in Carrie's favor, she's made it clear she'll be back. Carrie shares what it was like to be a first-time candidate in *Vote Local* on [page 9](#).

This summer, we were pleased to welcome **Mary Kate Crisp** as our new Syringe Exchange Program Coordinator for Western NC, and to date, she has saved over 130 people with overdose reversal kits. You can read more about Down Home's life-saving overdose prevention work in *Yes to Team NOPE* on [page 10](#). This year, we broke ground in Cabarrus County by knocking on almost 2,500 doors in a classic Down Home listening canvass. As usual, we heard "no one's ever asked me before" when we inquired about issues facing poor and working people. That's about to change as organizer **Jasmine Wright** connects with folks across Cabarrus. You can read more from Jasmine in *Rural Organizing on the Road* on [page 11](#).

Finally, Jasmine and fellow organizers **Kischa Peña**, **Chelsea Hoglen**, and our new organizer in Madison County, **Darlene Azarmi**, bring us to a close as they share their reflections on building power this year on [page 12](#). As we all look ahead to 2020, we'll leave you with a recap of the major wins this year by the numbers on [page 13](#).

We couldn't be more proud to know and work with each of these folks and our entire membership—now over 2,000 strong—as we build long-term political power for poor and working people in North Carolina. **Thank you for being a part of Down Home North Carolina in 2019.**

WHO IS DOWN HOME?

All are welcome in Down Home North Carolina. We are neighbors, rooted in the community, coming together to grow our state into a place that works for us, not just the rich and powerful. We organize to grow democracy and improve the quality of life, so our grandbabies inherit a state that is healthy and just. We unite to build the power and raise the voices of working people in small-town and rural North Carolina to take action on the issues that matter to us. By weaving together our different experiences, we can shape a democracy that serves working people, where our labor is valued, and our food, water, and land are healthy. Come on in y'all, we've got work to do.

STAFF:

Darlene Azarmi, WNC Organizer

Mary Kate Crisp, Syringe Exchange & Overdose Prevention Coordinator

Brigid Flaherty, Co-Director

Chelsea Hoglen, WNC Organizer

Carrie McBane, Haywood & Jackson Chapter Organizer

Kischa Peña, Alamance Chapter Organizer

Danny Timpona, State Field Manager

Jasmine Wright, Piedmont Organizer

Todd Zimmer, Co-Director

THE GRASSROOTS FIGHT FOR MEDICAID EXPANSION

by LYNNE PRICE PIERCE, Alamance County Chapter Member

“I never would have thought you would be in this situation!”

I hear this repeatedly when people discover I'm in the so-called Medicaid gap. I make too much to qualify for Medicaid, but not enough to be covered under the Affordable Care Act. Nearly six months after Governor Cooper vetoed our state budget, we still have 500,000 North Carolinians who will end 2019 without health coverage. This is simply unacceptable.

I run a food pantry in rural southern Alamance County, where we distribute food and try to be an informal community resource center. One



challenge I face is that there is no way the food pantry can afford to offer me health insurance, and I can't afford the price on my own. Many people I work with are in this same situation, as are many people living in rural parts of the state.

Because of the stigma around people who don't have insurance, I think it's important to talk about this subject honestly. I am a college graduate with a master's in Teaching History, and I have held a North Carolina Teaching License. I am the director of this food bank. And I am also in the Medicaid gap.

But truthfully, this is not just about me. I am one of the many Down Home members in the grassroots fight to expand Medicaid. This year, DHNC members hosted a series of educational town hall events that lifted up the stories of people affected by the lack of Medicaid expansion. Members participated in over 20 statewide vigils that honored people whose lives were lost because they could not access the healthcare they needed. Down Home also pitched and helped produce a powerful New York Times [op-ed video](#) that featured the stories of Carrie McBane, Robin Jordan, and Ricky Clay, and showed how lack of expansion has harmed so many lives. In June, these three members [stood with Governor Cooper](#) as he vetoed the state budget, citing lack of Medicaid expansion as a primary reason for his veto. These members also gave the Governor over 1,200 petition signatures supporting his veto, gathered by members at doors and community events. Shortly after, I was [invited](#) by Governor Cooper to attend a [roundtable meeting](#) on Medicaid expansion. My pre-teen daughter came with me, and like me, was upset and humbled by the life-threatening situations faced by others around the table. She understands the issue and is one of the young people who will be voting in a few years. I know this affected her.

Through Down Home, we have had the chance to bring forward more stories of people with direct experience with Medicaid. Debbie Smith, my fellow member from Alamance County, was dependent on opioids for almost twenty years. It is an experience that almost took her life. She got treatment because of Medicaid and

has been sober now for 22 years. She's also a sponsor with Narcotics Anonymous and works with people whose lives could be saved through Medicaid. When Governor Cooper held an event in Greensboro supporting Medicaid expansion, Debbie took her grandson. He's 20, and he had done nothing political before.

Another Down Home member, Amanda Bryson of Haywood County, has two children who qualify for Medicaid, but she doesn't. That means that while her children are covered when they get sick, she herself cannot access health insurance. This prevents her from seeking care for very treatable issues like depression and anxiety. Debbie's and Amanda's stories demonstrate that if we can get adults into better healthcare, it sets a pattern for healthier generations coming up.

Sometimes, people try to give me credit for working in community services so long, but honestly, it's just what we do for each other. I believe strongly that healthcare is a human right. It's a civil right. Unfortunately, not a single Republican leader showed up at any of the events I attended, and I remain especially disappointed by the inaction of my local Representatives. I wish our elected leaders would take the time to meet the people we serve at the pantry and hear how the lack of health coverage is hurting them. If health coverage were affordable for everyone, it would mean healthier people, healthier lifestyles, better education, and better employees. It would bring jobs to the community. It's so simple to see when you actually look.

As we move into 2020, the fight continues. On September 11th, NC House Republicans made national news when they held an unscheduled and unannounced vote to override Governor Cooper's veto. The House passed the override with a vote of 55-9, with just over half of the legislators present. Down Home members organized quickly and led an emergency rally at the State Legislature attended by over 100 people. The NC Senate is likely to call for an override vote when they return in January. Regardless of the outcome, DHNC members will continue this grassroots fight for access to affordable and quality healthcare for all poor and working people. **Stay tuned.**



“WE’RE BUILDING OUR POWER!”

BIRD-DOGGING IN THREE STEPS

by TREVOR MARK GATES, Jackson County Chapter Member

“It’s important to get our leaders on record. We are holding them accountable, and that’s the most patriotic thing you can do.”

WHEN OUR ELECTED LEADERS HARM MY FRIENDS, I GET ANGRY.

I’ve always been political, but I didn’t have a direct outlet for it until I became involved with Down Home. Right after I became a member, I got to travel to Washington, DC with Down Home. There, I got to be exactly where I wanted to be, in the midst of change agents making the world a better place. Down Home has really shown up for me, which has helped me show up for myself and for my community.

One way to hold our elected leaders accountable is through “bird-dogging”—a method of getting them on record about an issue important to you. I’ve done this two times in the past few months, with two other Down Home members, Lyn Carver and Ryan Jackson. So far, we’ve identified three steps to bird-dogging. First, get angry. Second, do your research. Third, practice what you will say.

The first time I bird-dogged, I approached my state Representative, Michele D. Presnell, at a fundraising event. I’m visually impaired, and it was clear she wanted to get a picture with a disabled person, so they escorted me to the front of the line. I asked her if she cared about my life, and she said she did. Then I asked her why she was okay with over 2,000 people in her district dying. I asked her if she would expand Medicaid. She was taken aback by my directness, and she gave me a straight-

up, “No.” I told her directly that she had blood on her hands, and it felt good. It’s so much more powerful to say what’s on your mind to those responsible, rather than just venting on social media.

Then just a few months ago, NC Speaker of the House Tim Moore was at Western Carolina University, where I’m a student. Ryan Jackson and I went. We did our prep, we role-played, and we practiced what we would say. But this time, Ryan was told he couldn’t film without a press pass, which is absurd. But he thought on his feet, set his phone down, and kept recording. So, we got the audio.

I told Speaker Moore about my healthcare situation, and he laid it on thick how much he wanted to help me find a solution. But after a few minutes, I asked him why, if he cared about my life and those like me, did he attack our democracy? I asked him why he went behind the people’s back with the vote on Medicaid expansion. It really threw him off. He made an excuse, then gave the story that everyone had been properly notified about the vote, which is not true. He didn’t give clear answers on anything, especially policy solutions, and we deserve answers. I hope other Down Home members will start bird-dogging. It’s essential to get our leaders on record. We are holding them accountable, and that’s the most patriotic thing you can do.

Check out Trevor and Ryan’s bird-dog with Speaker Moore at downhomenc.org.



DEEP CANVASS. REAL CONVERSATIONS.

Q & A with SUGELEMA LYNCH and MAHSIMA HALLAJI, Alamance County Members

From August to November, our Alamance Chapter, in partnership with People's Action, led a door-to-door canvass designed to “build a bigger we” in our communities. Our team was out every week, four times a week, using their own stories as a starting place to build solidarity. Canvassers held over 1,000 conversations that countered the narrative that uses race to pit us against each other in support of the interests of corporations and the wealthy elite. Below, two of our members, **SUGELEMA LYNCH** and **MAHSIMA HALLAJI**, share lessons and insights from their incredible work on the canvass. Look for a full report on findings from this deep canvass early next year.

WHAT IS ONE OF YOUR MOST MEMORABLE CONVERSATIONS? WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

SUGELEMA: My most memorable story was a man in his late 50's that was torn about immigration. He worked with undocumented immigrants and acknowledged how hard-working they were and how they were “just trying to provide for their family.” However, he was frustrated that this person was undocumented and drove to work each day without a license. Later, he admitted that he would probably do the same thing if he wanted to create a better life for himself and his family. He would take the risk. It was interesting to see this man struggle with his dissonance. On the one hand, he wanted immigrants to obey the laws and follow the rules, but on the other hand, he knew his co-workers were just working hard to make a living to have the American dream.

So, I learned that even though this person was frustrated by laws being broken, he still wanted the best of both worlds. He wanted undocumented immigrants to have opportunities that provided elevation for their lives. He also realized that government policies needed to change in order to give these immigrants an opportunity of a better life, just like those that came through Ellis Island.

MAHSIMA: For me, I'm thinking of a man I spoke to one Saturday. I remember him so well, because our conversation really placed me into a position that I hadn't really been in before on the subjects of healthcare and immigration. He recalled his father's last days at a nursing home. He was very fond of his father and went into great detail about the things he accomplished when he was alive. He was a World War II veteran and a hard-working man. His father had two purple hearts from his time in WWII but could not ever get the help he needed to pay medical expenses.

So, after his death, there were a lot of bills to pay off. For him, the blame was to be placed on the folks in the same nursing home that had Medicare and Medicaid that never had to pay anything.

This memory he had was so emotional and deep. For him, it was hands-down the fault of those with full coverage but did not “deserve” it like his noble father did. This man's pain must have been immense because he was willing to blame it on innocent people instead of a lack of appropriate government programs and policies. This was so heavy. I thought about it for days after. The stories that people hold in terms of these societal issues go DEEP. The pain is very alive and seems to be blind in the worst of cases. I took this conversation with me into all my others, because it really helped me understand the personal root of most political conversations.

WHAT WERE YOUR GOALS FOR THIS DEEP CANVASS?

MAHSIMA: My biggest goal with this canvass was to empower people to share their stories and to recognize that they are very relevant to the politics of today and always. Our stories show us more than anything, we are connected and more similar than we ever could know.

Down Home NC was founded to challenge white supremacy by building and growing a multi-racial coalition of poor and working people in North Carolina.

And the only way we can find these connections is to reach out to others in our community and ask them for their stories.

SUGELEMA: The one thing we accomplished is finding common ground with people at a time when our country is so divided. For many of our conversations, we created mutual respect. By sharing these sentiments, in the long run, the hope is to inspire people to connect with others they would not otherwise connect with. Through connection, we can begin to cultivate commonality and ultimately change the political climate to work for all of us not just the wealthy few.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO WORK ON THE CANVASS?

MAHSIMA: Working on this deep canvass has been unlike anything you can ever do in the political world. It takes the experience of voters and their stories and places them back into political conversations, which is rarely done by our leaders.

SUGELEMA: I think our canvassing team really connected with a good majority of voters by listening empathetically to their opinions and stories on their doorsteps, even if we didn't always agree. Working on the deep canvass project has been an empowering way to reach voters on a personal level.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FOR FUTURE CONVERSATIONS?

SUGELEMA: Danny Timpona, our lead organizer, challenged us to give all of our energy for a cause that was unlike any other. Every day he reminded us that “if not us, then who” would be around to do such crucial work. As we head into 2020, my biggest take-away is that together, we can make big changes for the greater good.

MAHSIMA: I think this work starts at the micro and trickles into the macro. We can learn that team spirit and motivation comes from supporting each other and having empathy for each of our paths in life. Because at the end of the day, we all have more in common than different. If we are to make progress toward a better world, **we must stand together instead of fearful and divided in every setting possible.**



COURT WATCHING IN ALAMANCE COUNTY

by LISA ROWDEN, LORRAINE WERTS, and DEBBIE SMITH, Alamance County Chapter Members

Spend time witnessing the disparities in court proceedings in Alamance County, and you'll see why we are Court Watchers.

Court watching is straightforward and very important. We collect data, look for inconsistencies, and document what happens. As Court Watchers, we are present the first time an incarcerated person goes in front of a judge. We pay particular attention to what happens during the first appearance, because this is a crucial point in the process. It's also when the bail that was set by the Magistrate is announced. Often questions are asked, and the incarcerated person may not know how to answer, or they may have to take in too many details to fully grasp the impact of the decisions they are making. When we can, we connect them to other tools or resources, like making sure they can make their court appearances.

The cash bail system is devastating to poor people, and it's all because they can't afford to pay. The poverty rate in Alamance County is higher than the state average, so you're just heaping more onto them. How are poor people supposed to pay court costs, afford an attorney, and also keep their lives going? For many people, whether they can make bail can mean the difference between keeping or losing custody of their children. This is that serious of a problem.

Down Home has also developed The Alamance County Bail Fund, and we have raised \$16,000. We've helped five people make their bail, which means they can still earn a living or take care of their families while they await trial. One thing we'd like to see changed is that the Magistrate often sets the bail with no input on whether someone can actually afford the bond, and no one from the public is present.

The first appearances are at the Alamance County Courthouse, Monday mornings at 9:00 am, and Tuesday through Friday afternoons

"It's important that they know we're paying attention. We think it keeps them honest and aware that the public is actually watching."

at 2:00 pm. For training, our Down Home chapter partnered with Southerners on New Ground (SONG) and the ACLU. We would love more people to train to be a court watcher, especially on Monday mornings. We can help connect to training, and we'd go together to start with.

We've become good friends through this work. We all have different backgrounds, but we all want *all* people to be treated fairly. Lisa runs a dog grooming business, Debbie worked in paralegal, and Lorraine is retired from dental school. In January, we'll have been doing this a year.

We aren't learning for the first time that poor people are discriminated against, or that Black and Brown people are discriminated against. We know this already. Court Watching is all really practical work. It's important that they know we're paying attention. We think it keeps them honest and aware that the public is actually watching. We made tee shirts with eyeballs on them, so people know we are there. People ask, "What does this mean?" We say, **"It means we're watching."**



LESSONS FROM BLACK CAMPAIGN SCHOOL

by DREAMA CALDWELL, Alamance County Chapter Member

I GOT INVOLVED WITH DOWN HOME A FEW YEARS AGO AFTER BEING ENTANGLED IN THE COURT SYSTEM AND REALIZING ALL THAT WAS WRONG AND UNJUST ABOUT CASH BAIL.

Since then, I have come to believe the best way to change the bail system is from the inside, which made me think about running for office.

When an opportunity arose to attend Black Campaign School—a training program for aspiring Black candidates—I shared it with Kischa, Down Home’s organizer in Alamance County. She worked her magic, and the next thing I knew, I was on my way to the training, along with seven of my fellow Down Home members.

Black Campaign School differed greatly from other trainings I’ve attended. Many of us who are Black feel defeated in a culture of white

supremacy because it feels like we can never win. This training was such an inspiration because I had the opportunity to network with some amazing Black people from across the country running for different offices, or working behind the scenes. I got to meet Black people from places that are very white, who are saying, “We’re going for it!” That was amazing.

We were able to ask real questions and get real answers. So, if I wanted to know how to deal with racism in my campaign, I could get an answer from a Black organizer who had actually dealt with it. One consultant I met worked directly with Stacey Abrams’ campaign, so she was able to talk about some of the challenges she faced, and share with us how she responded.

One of the biggest “a-ha” moments I had is that you don’t choose the base, the base chooses you. I left intending to build relationships with people and go into spaces I have never been before. Black Campaign School strengthened my desire to run for office—and it also made me committed to running the *right* way. And now, I am ready to run for Alamance County Commission in 2020.

“Black Campaign School strengthened my desire to run for office—and it also made me committed to running the right way. And now, I am ready to run for Alamance County Commission in 2020.”

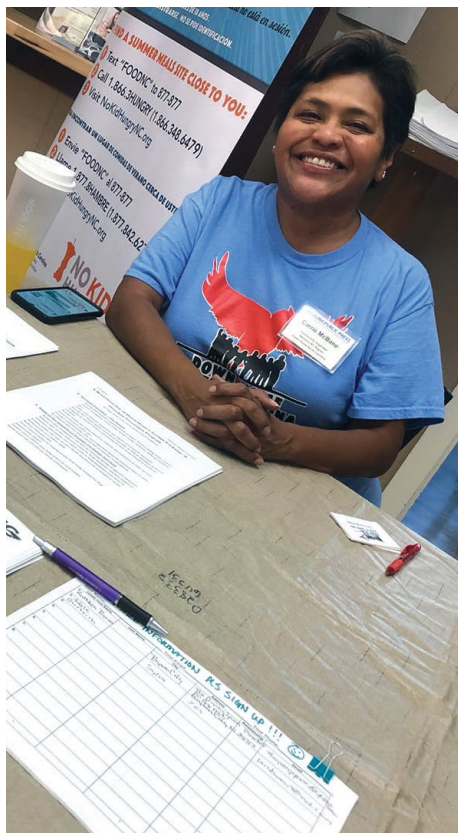
The County Commission is important because they control how our county budget is spent. And in looking at the budget, I know that my community has not been part of the funding. I want to help our officials use our tax dollars differently and think differently about our youth. Every kid deserves the chance to explore and gain new experiences in childhood. How do you know you want to be a pilot if you’ve never been on a plane? Or a zoologist if you’ve never been to the zoo? Based on its funding priorities, our County Commission could help position our children for success as they grow up.

In my life, I’ve transformed my thinking from negative to positive, and I know what that has done for me. There is a misunderstanding that people who are not present are choosing not to be active and don’t care. That is not the case. They’re in survival mode. It’s not that they don’t want to be there, but it’s more important to put food on the table or go to their second job. Their voices have been crying out in our community for a long time. **Our elected officials just need to listen and act on what they hear.**



VOTE LOCAL

Q&A with Sylva Municipal Candidate CARRIE MCBANE



CARRIE MCBANE of Sylva, NC, worked in the retail and foodservice industries for many years. Since she became involved with Down Home, she has become a talented and outspoken advocate for working-class people. This year, she worked hard on the campaign to expand Medicaid in NC and shared her story with the New York Times. She was the first woman of color to run for Sylva Town Council and despite being a first-time candidate, tied for one of the open seats with 108 votes. The toss of a coin—literally—broke the tie, which unfortunately did not go in Carrie’s favor. She has made it clear, though, that we’ll see her on the ballot again. We are so proud of you, Carrie!

WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO RUN FOR LOCAL OFFICE?

It felt like the universe was nudging me in this direction, but it all happened more quickly than I had planned. Ultimately, it was mainly because of the encouragement of some of my friends. Once I became more comfortable with the idea, I got excited. I was like, wow, I might be able to pair my passion for helping working people with a position on the town council. So, I started the whole race with a commitment to listening. I just really wanted people to talk to me.

WHAT ISSUES DID YOU HEAR FROM FOLKS?

A group called “Say No to the Road” was formed by community members against the current construction plan for one of the main roads in town. They want a different plan, or they don’t want

it at all. These folks’ concerns are being dismissed and told to ‘get over it.’ And that really resonated with me, as I watched people’s reactions to being so dismissed. It was really powerful for me. It made me realize I never wanted anyone to feel like I was not listening to them.

Another critical issue in our town is that many crosswalks not being properly marked. A lot of drivers don’t stop, and I’ve almost been hit a couple times waiting to cross the road. It’s actually a huge problem. Improving things so basic motivated me to run.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

I have to say, running a campaign is very different than I thought. At first it felt like high school because even at the local level, it felt very competitive. But once I reframed my thinking, I was very happy with the notion I could bring my skills at community organizing to an elected position. And working as a server in the past also meant I had lines of communication already open in the community, which was really helpful. I learned listening was the most important place to start.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR OTHERS WHO WANT TO RUN?

*My advice to anyone thinking of running for office is to really think about the work required. It’s a big decision for anybody. Rely on your support systems. Ask for help. Although it may be a small town, your race still has big implications on lots of people’s lives. **I’m still processing things, but I will definitely run again.***





YES TO TEAM NOPE

by MARY KATE CRISP, Syringe Exchange & Overdose Prevention Coordinator

“Through our overdose prevention program this year, we have had roughly 70 clients and have had over 100 overdose reversals. Our entire focus is on ending the overdose crisis in Western North Carolina.”

I’m in school for substance abuse counseling, so harm reduction is important to me.

I lived with active addiction for three years, and when I stopped using, I started going out into the community to volunteer. It was a big piece of my recovery, and I was thrilled when I was hired by Down Home this summer.

The community organizing side of my job is called Team NOPE, which stands for Neighbors for Overdose Prevention and Education. We do community outreach and education, run campaigns relating to drug user rights and ending overdose, and organize direct actions and advocacy movements. As part of my work, I also distribute Naloxone, the antidote for an opioid overdose, along with the syringes, so people have the immediate ability to save each other. Through our overdose prevention program this year, we have had roughly 70 clients and have had over 100 overdose reversals. Our entire focus is on ending the overdose crisis in Western North Carolina.

One of the biggest challenges to ending the overdose crisis is ending the stigma. Recently, I overheard someone at my school saying, “I just don’t understand why people do drugs.” I’m thankful for my studies, because I know the neurobiology, and I explained that substance abuse is a chronic degenerative brain disease that takes hold of your survival system. Most people have experienced heartbreaking trauma and often started using drugs at a young age before their brains could make good decisions. This, along with the dopamine released from drugs, makes quitting extremely difficult. She understood, and I was happy. I think that’s a good example of how honest conversations can change stigma.

Another big part of this work is helping each person gain access to the tools to fight for their own rights and their own lives. It’s important to have people who are active users on the team for the insight and perspective they provide, and the skills they can share. This fall, about ten of us piled ourselves, our belongings, and about \$2,000 worth of harm reduction supplies

into three cars and made the seven-hour drive to Charleston, West Virginia as part of a massive emergency response.

People in West Virginia have limited and ever-dwindling access to harm reduction supplies, which has led to the worst overdose and Hep C/HIV crisis in the entire country. We put together supply kits that included syringes, Narcan, and other live-saving supplies. We gave away about 50 bags an hour because wherever we looked, we found people in need. While we were there, we also joined a candlelight vigil on the steps of the State Capitol building and participated in a massive “die in” where we laid down on the ground in a silent protest. People stopped and stared, but nobody moved or said a word. I could hear sniffles of people nearby who were no doubt thinking of their loved one whose life was taken by overdose due to stigma and inhumane policies.

We are currently mobile in Jackson County, and as we move into 2020, we plan to expand and grow our services. **I am excited for what’s in store next.**

RURAL ORGANIZING ON THE ROAD

by JASMINE WRIGHT, Piedmont Organizer

“I’D LIKE TO CALL MYSELF A TRUE CAROLINIAN, BEING RAISED ON THE BORDER BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH CAROLINA.”

That’s how I began the question I posed at the Women of Color Lead the Way Town Hall in Washington, DC in October. It was the beginning of a week that would also take me to Jackson, MS and Greenville, SC for two other summits. But I’ll get to that in a second.

As an organizer in the south, I was particularly interested to hear from our leaders in Congress how they plan to address voter suppression in the rural south. I specifically addressed my question to Rep. Barbara Lee (CA-13) on a panel that also included Rep. Pramila Jayapal (WA-7), Rep. Ilhan Omar (MN-5), Rep. Ayanna (MA-7) and Rep. Deb Haaland (NM-1).

Rep. Lee responded with a story of how she had never had an interest in politics or the voting process until she met her mentor and then Presidential Candidate hopeful, Shirley Chisholm. She shared that Chisholm strongly believed in our fight for Civil Rights, and saw our engagement in the electoral process as a gateway to our liberties. Rep. Lee also mentioned civil and voting rights legislation she had supported, and a recent bill, H. Res 41, Rejecting White Nationalism and Supremacy. Rep. Pressley reminded us of the importance of local elections and event encouraged me to run for office. Other highlights included a *dope* speech by Black Lives Matter founder Alicia Garza and several tributes honoring Rep. Elijah Cummings. I was also a proud Down Home member when Mehrdad Azemun, National Field Director for People’s Action, lifted up our Race-Class Narrative canvassing work.

I left DC inspired, and I arrived in Jackson just in time for dinner at a Civil Rights museum. BYP100 is a national member-based organization of 18-35-year-old Black activists and organizers creating freedom and justice for all Black people. I became even more appreciative of my invitation to attend the Southeast Region Leadership Training when I discovered we were staying on a Black-owned land trust and co-op. The Cooperative of New West Jackson is a group of neighbors who literally own eight blocks of their neighborhood. After dinner, it was amazing to see the stacks of 25-30 leftover plates wrapped in aluminum foil, ready for distribution to the community.

My visit to Jackson was an inspiring and humbling experience. During our state breakouts, Down Home was brought on as a partner to BYP’s statewide efforts. I saw the worst and the best of what Jackson could become, and what it physically looks like to create sustainability for poor and working people. I left Jackson more grounded to the meaning of building people power and connecting with a community.

From Jackson, I traveled to Greenville, SC for The Rural Women’s Summit, which hosted sessions ranging from a live podcast recording of “Women Leading Interfaith Movements in Rural America” to panels like “Ending Mass Incarceration Where It Begins: In Our Own Backyards.” Many sessions and workshops at this summit were led by women of color, specifically Black women from South Carolina.

“In seven days, in three locations, I met with dozens of leaders on multiple levels from politicians to activists. I shared space and meals with like-minded folks, and my purpose and meaning of organizing came full circle.”



I appreciated that. I also couldn’t help but notice that there were a few men present, including Reverend Brad Thie from Duke Divinity School, whose work focuses on missions lifting up rural women. The Rural Women’s Summit created a space for me to learn more about the efforts of rural women leaders from across the nation and connect with other folks on shared issues and values. I also bonded with my fellow Down Home colleagues, share organizing tips, and acknowledge the true value of rural organizing. It was a great experience.

In seven days, in three locations, I met with dozens of leaders on multiple levels, from politicians to activists. I shared space and meals with like-minded folks, and my purpose and meaning of organizing came full circle. I also learned that the Black delegation of the Southeast has unanimously agreed that sugar DOES NOT go in grits!

I came back excited and ready to pour into building Down Home.



ORGANIZERS' INSIGHTS ON BUILDING POWER

by CHELSEA HOGLEN, JASMINE WRIGHT, KISCHA PEÑA, and DARLENE AZARMI



The wins this year were many, and the stories on the previous pages explain what those successes look like. As we come to a close, we thought hearing insights about building power from a few of our organizers would be a great way to take us into the new year (new decade!) and beyond. **CHELSEA, DARLENE, JASMINE, and KISCHA...**take it away!

CHELSEA: This year, members got to experience speaking truth to power to someone in office. For a lot of folks in our chapter, being a part of Down Home has been the first vehicle through which they've been able to advocate for their own rights. So whether it's Medicaid expansion, getting paid more, or advocating for more affordable housing, this is the first time a lot of folks have felt like, "wow, I can stand up for myself." At Down Home, we are not only building communal power, we're also building power within. I love watching the lightbulb come on, when I see individual power shine through. When I see it combined with the power of our community, the actual impact it can have on lives on a micro level and macro level is incredible.

DARLENE: I am excited to be starting a chapter in Madison County because I love the investigative phase and the "go talk to everyone" feeling of building a base. It's been amazing to see how many people checked "yes" to the survey question in Madison County about whether they would join an organization like Down Home.

It shows there is a great need for us to go into rural places to build community power.

JASMINE: One thing I love about organizing in Cabarrus County is knowing that I am building people power from the ground up. This year, Down Home was able to send 20+ members to Washington D.C., and those members saw/heard the importance of our work from national perspective. I got to ask a Congresswoman of Color about voter suppression on a national platform, and later meet and speak with other Representatives. That wave of encouragement empowered our members to engage more with their chapters, and even run for office.

KISCHA: My favorite part of organizing is connecting with the folks in the community. I love when people get excited about something and put forth the effort to make it happen. I see a real shift happening around poor and working people, especially with the East Burlington community. We saw a greater sense of solidarity amongst members this year. I was really proud of our Mayoral Town Hall in Alamance County. It was really important for the community to see that Down Home understands the significance of their voices being heard. I think more people care about elections after they actually hear the candidates. Once you get involved, it's no longer just a name on a piece of paper. I think we are getting to the actual needs of the people. **I think we are seeing a shift towards an actual balance of power.**



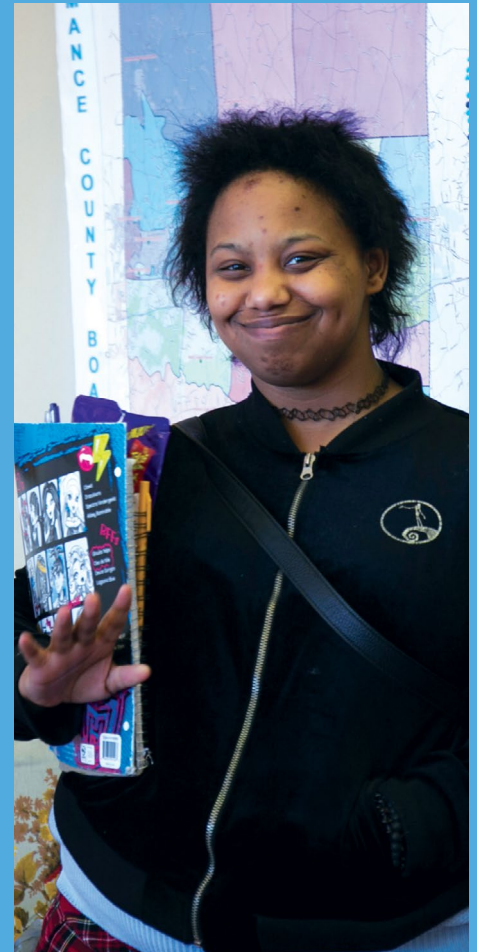
CONCLUSION: LOOKING BACK TO LOOK AHEAD

When Down Home formed in 2017, we did so believing in the organizing power and potential within rural and small town North Carolina.

In our communities, we have witnessed first-hand how racism ruins the lives of Black and Brown people and seen how racial division is used to manipulate our democracy in favor of corporations and the wealthy elite. We fully reject this as the norm, and Down Home members are leading the way in the fight for a new “normal.” Our 2,000+ members continue to grow our power every day. We move into 2020 with the

biggest electoral wins, the most chapters, and the deepest organizing bench we could have ever imagined. We will go as deep as we need until we build the multiracial democracy we all deserve.

We'll leave you with a recap of some of our major accomplishments this year—wins that give us reasons to be hopeful, and lessons that will guide us as we move ahead. [See you in 2020!](#)



DOWN HOME BY THE NUMBERS

IN 2019:

Down Home NC **DOUBLED** our membership from...



to



2018:
1,000 members

2019:
2,056 members

...and grew from 3 chapters to 5!

ALAMANCE COUNTY

HAYWOOD COUNTY

JACKSON COUNTY

CABARRUS COUNTY

NEW Chapter forming!

MADISON COUNTY

NEW Chapter forming!

Look at what else our members accomplished across all our chapters:

Healthcare:

Over 1,500 people acted in support of Medicaid expansion, including:

- **125+ PEOPLE** organized and attended statewide **Healthcare vigils**
- **1,200 PEOPLE** signed a petition to Governor Cooper supporting **Medicaid expansion**
- **80 PEOPLE** attended local actions to support the Governor's **veto of the state budget**
- **100+ PEOPLE** joined **emergency press conference** after surprise House attacking Medicaid
- **40 PEOPLE** participated in "Have a Heart" Valentine's Day actions for **Medicaid expansion**
- **90,000+ PEOPLE** viewed member **Medicaid stories by the New York Times** on Facebook

Overdose Prevention

- **130+ PEOPLE** saved with *Narcan overdose reversal kits*
- **70 CLIENTS** served in *overdose prevention program*

Cash Bail Reform

- **\$16,000 RAISED** for the *Alamance County Bail Fund*
- **5 PEOPLE'S BAIL COVERED** through the Bail fund

Canvassing

- **1,000 CONVERSATIONS** held during *race-class canvassing*
- **2,426 PEOPLE** reached in listening canvass in *Cabarrus Chapter*

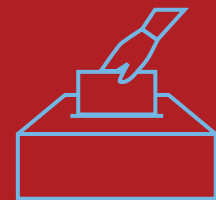
Electoral Work



8,672 DOORS KNOCKED



4,011 CALLS AND TEXTS



1,044 VOTERS MOVED



5 NEWSPAPER AD BUYS



...leading to **6 WINS OUT OF 8 RACES,**
and 1 tie

**All are welcome
at Down Home.**

Want to join the folks you just read about in the fight for poor and working people in North Carolina? Become a Down Home NC member today at downhomenc.org.



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