



Down Home North Carolina Annual Report 2021

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Friends,

What is “community?” It’s one of those words that can be thrown around and applied to so many things it risks becoming hollow. At Down Home we want to put deep meaning back into the word. To build a resilient multiracial, working class, rural movement, it feels essential to do so.

For us, “community” works best when we come together to make something new without losing the individual differences that make each of us unique. We each add a little to the song that we are singing together. When it works, we harmonize. Todd may play his part by asking how we can grow our community, bring more people in, and build the “bigger we” that works together to bring about change. Dreama adds her view, asking how we can make that community safe and accessible for everyone. Our staff and members also bring their own questions about and understanding of community, and the result is better than what any one of us could have made on our own.

As you will find in this report, Down Home spent much of 2021 recalibrating to explore and answer important questions about community. We connected rural folks across North Carolina to one another so they can organize with mutual support. We took the issues that our neighbors said are most important to them

and fought for Build Back Better in Washington and a People’s Budget in Raleigh. We knocked on doors to mobilize small town voters in municipal elections. We centered listening and conversation through deep canvases that engaged thousands of rural North Carolinians.

Building and strengthening our community is an active task and it is something we must do every day. In 2021, our staff and members worked diligently to imagine and build the community that we want. We became an independent organization and we proudly recognized our staff union. Then, recognizing the need for an institutionalized process for racial equity, we trained both management and staff in REI. Meanwhile, a Down Home member, Dreama, moved into a leadership position at the organization. We believe all of this helps to lay steady ground off which we can further build.

At Down Home, our community will never look like just one thing. We are proudly diverse, and we are dedicated to working across divides and differences. It’s messy, it’s slow, but it’s right.

Come on in, y’all. We have work to do.

Dreama Caldwell, Todd Zimmer,
and the whole team at Down Home North Carolina

- **Alamance Leadership Summits**
- **Seditious Seven** Actions across the state in response to January 6th
- Campaigning to release rainy day fund for COVID relief
- Teach in - Wall Street vs. the People: What Happened with GameStop?
- Down Home becomes independent organization
- Haywood County Member launch **No New Jails** Campaign
- Members successfully petition Town of Mars Hill for a **Black History Month resolution**
- **Bailouts** in Alamance County in response to COVID outbreak at the jail
- Alamance County members **door knock around evictions** to learn from their community
- **Race/Class Community Conversation** events held
- Madison County members launch **Don't Trash Madison** campaign to help access to local dump
- Member **Dreama Caldwell** announced as incoming Director
- **North Carolina People's Budget** launched
- Cabarrus County members survey community about criminal justice concerns
- Down Home's **Homefront** educational series launched to educate community about far-right extremism in NC
- **Build Back Better** coalition work begins
- Down Home increases activity around **Medicaid Expansion** for North Carolina
- Haywood County deep canvass over **jails and jail alternatives**
- **What's On the Ballot?** workshops to educate communities about local elections
- Down Home members create local electoral platforms
- Statewide **Build Back Better BBQs** to raise awareness around the legislation

JAN

FEB

MAR

APR

MAY

JUN

OUR WORK IN 2021



- Down Home launches first statewide membership meetings
- **People's Budget** goes to the NCGA
- Local chapter platforms launched
- All Down Home staff participate in **Visions Racial Equity and Inclusion** workshops and process
- All Down Home management attend **PACE**

- **August Recess Actions** for **Build Back Better** organized statewide
- **Healthcare for All Townhall**
- Co-founder Brigid Flaherty passes the torch to Dreama Caldwell as new Co-Director
- **"Funeral March"** at NCGA

- Down Home **Municipal Election Voter Guides** distributed in small towns
- **Rise of Dreama Caldwell** music video released
- Education for All Townhall

- Large municipal elections canvasses launched across Cabarrus and Alamance counties
- **Get Out The Vote Campaign** launched on social media and digital platforms
- Film screenings of **"Swing State"** hosted by members in Alamance County
- Down Home Deep Canvass expands to 15 counties

- November **Municipal Elections** statewide
- **People's Budget** campaigns intensify push in Raleigh
- **Party at the Polls** with Black Voters Matter

- **Build Back Better** fight moves to the Senate
- **Swing State** events continue
- **Alamance Bail Fund** wrap up year having bailed out 60 local residents
- Annual Toy Drive

JUL

AUG

SEP

OCT

NOV

DEC

Photos above by T. Crider and Down Home staff and members

CURIOSITY AND CONVERSATION

Deep canvassing is teaching us how to do our work.

Admittedly, the conversation starts off a little choppy. After all, a stranger has called out of the blue. After a few pleasantries, the stranger starts asking about how involved the government should be in the economic recovery. Should the government be doing more for working people? For jobs? For the economy? The woman on the line answers hesitantly.

Fifteen minutes later, however, a dialogue is emerging. The caller— a member of Down Home’s Deep Canvassing Team— is sharing about the anxiety she felt during the early days of the pandemic when she pieced together jobs into a near 80-hour work week to cover her basic needs. The woman on the line was empathetic, but uncertain how much she wanted to see the government involved in her day-to-day life. But soon she reveals that she is concerned about her daughter who can’t get on Medicaid yet needs to go to the doctor regularly. “This situation could bankrupt her,” she says.

Together, the caller and the woman agree that if the North Carolina General Assembly would pass Medicaid expansion then not only would the woman’s daughter’s life be better, but her community would feel safer and more secure.

Deep Curiosity

Calling strangers and asking them to talk about politics doesn’t sound like it would work, but this is exactly what Down Home’s Deep Canvassing team has been doing thousands of times this year— with proven results.



This year, Down Home leaned into our canvassing work, both through Deep Canvassing and more traditional door-knocking canvasses. Our teams engaged small town and rural North Carolinians in thousands of conversations, talking to them about everything from the importance of voting in municipal elections (photos above) to asking voters about their views of the government and economy. Photos by staff and members.

Our deep canvassers are proving wrong the stereotype that rural folk are suspicious of strangers. Tabatha Davis, Down Home member, deep canvasser, and country dweller herself, finds that the further out she goes to knock on a door, the more eager people seem to be to talk.

“You just have to show them you aren’t trying to sell them something or get them to do anything,” she says. “You can show them that you are there to listen because you are a lot like them and care.”

Niko Schmidt makes deep canvassing calls from his basement that doubles as his art studio. Sometimes his kids join him, keeping him company as he works. “Sure, some folks just hang up on you,” he explains. “But on a good night you will get three or four really good conversations where you feel like the person is really heard.”

“Often you will talk to someone who doesn’t think their opinion matters because they are not educated about politics, or they don’t see themselves particularly interested in politics. But once you tell them these politics impact them and by that fact alone their opinion matters, they start to open up.”

“It helps that I’m actually very curious,” he adds.

This sentiment is echoed by everyone on the Down Home Deep Canvassing team. Each is eager to share that they do this work to impact political change, but that they are also open to how the work can and does change them. When curiosity and openness come across in the conversation, it can be transformative.

Elena Peterson, another member of the team, shares a recent conversation she had with a nurse in a long-term care facility who was against vaccine mandates and hadn’t been vaccinated herself. She was expecting to be fired over this choice.

“In a non-deep canvassing context, I might have thrown my hands up and said I don’t know how to have a conversation about this!” admits Elena. But instead, she shared that her mother who works in healthcare and feels overburdened and not listened to. “This really resonated [with her] and she talked about how much she cared about her job and the relationships she had there.”

“A lot of her hesitancy around the vaccine was based in her sense that she felt abandoned by the government during the course of the pandemic and that she felt she was giving so much with no support at all,” explains Elena. “The vaccine was one more example of higher ups making things scarier and more difficult for her.”

“I thought vaccines would be this impenetrable thing we couldn’t talk through, but it wasn’t. [I told her that] to me government works best when it’s a reflection of the people it serves, and this really resonated with her. No new facts were shared, there was no groundbreaking, no lightbulb – but we did reorient over this conversation.”



Photo of a conversation at a recent Down Home event by T. Crider

Deep Sharing

Sharing connecting stories is the foundation of deep canvassing. Down Home's team is quick to offer themselves into the conversation, with a personal story or a story about their family.

Niko explains that you can also create deep connections over shared material needs and interests.

"My best conversations are with people who aren't politically aligned with me but are economically aligned with me. I talk to people who support Trump and when they bring him up, I say, look, we can probably both agree that no one gives a sh** about those of us who live paycheck to paycheck."

"If they are actual working-class people, it's easy to find connections over class because no one loves a millionaire or thinks they actually care about us."

"Sometimes people will want to know what political party you belong to and we say that's not what we are doing," says Tabatha.

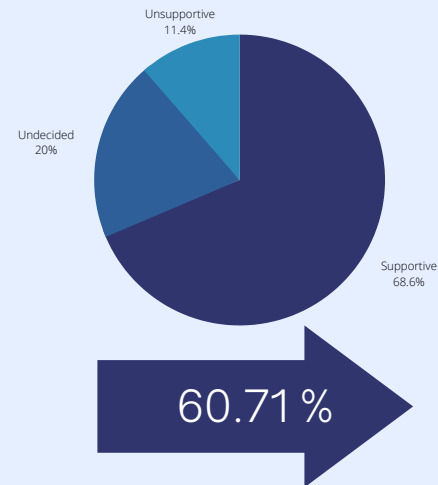
Our team members say that partisan politics surface quickly, but the typical, polarized talking points dissolve when the conversation turns to talking about needs.

Elena says that she has done important canvassing before for political candidates she believed in. "I felt good about knocking on doors and getting out the vote for these people. But it felt really unresolved. People I spoke to had so many issues going on in their lives and had deeper questions."

"The meat of those conversations lay elsewhere," she says. "Deep canvassing allows you to cast your gaze into that."

CANVASS SPOTLIGHT: NO NEW JAILS

Down Home spoke with nearly 700 local residents in Haywood County as part of our No New Jails campaign about the proposed new jail.



By the end of the conversation, 68.6% of the people we spoke to supported our position that local funds should be spent on supportive measures, not a new jail.

Over 60% of the people we talked to were persuaded from either wanting the new jail to feeling neutral or feeling neutral to opposing the new jail.



Photo of members of our canvassing team at a Black Voters Matter event in Alamance County by Christine Lashley

Deep Change

Southerners are talkers. Sure, that's another stereotype but it feels universal. We greet strangers, we fill up quiet places with our voices, and we ask everyone about how their mama is.

"Southerners are big chatters," Elena observes. "We have a cultural orientation towards conversation and a willingness to let someone say what they need to say. It's classically southern." This helps when she is making a phone call; people are likely to hear her out and if she is given that time she can express some curiosity and compassion to set the tone for a meaningful discussion.

"In the South, we talk all the time but not often about something of substance," says Niko. "That's certainly true in Yadkin County where I am from. We talk but talk in circles. We don't like to offend people or have trouble, so you pretend that certain things aren't happening. So, I think people aren't used to direct questions like we do in deep canvassing. And I guess they appreciate it."

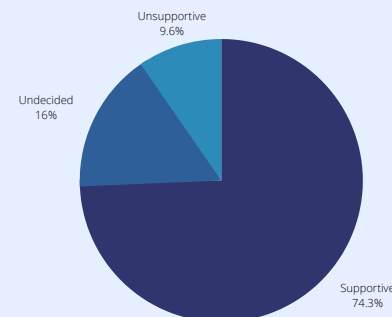
Tabatha agrees that people seem hungry to just be asked about their opinions instead of talking around issues or defaulting to polarized talking points. "People are eager to connect in a meaningful way. They know their opinion matters and they have good ideas about what needs to change but, especially deeper out in the country, no one has acted like it does. We do."



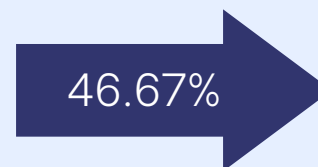
Want to learn more about the door to door canvassing we did for the municipal elections this year? Scan this code to visit the story on our blog.

CANVASS SPOTLIGHT: RURAL JOBS NARRATIVE

Down Home engaged in over 500 conversations with rural residents asking if the government should be more involved in job creation and employment post-pandemic. Our team called people who identified as Democrats, Republicans, Independents and unaffiliated voters alike.



At the end of the conversations, 84.1% of the people we spoke to were supportive of the idea that the government should be involved in issues surrounding rural jobs.



As a result of these deep conversations, our team reports that 46.67% of the people they talked to changed their views from unsupportive to undecided or from undecided to supportive.

OTHER 2021 DOWN HOME CANVASSES

Down Home conducted canvasses across the state in 2021, including:

- Get Out the Vote door to door canvassing in Alamance County for the municipal elections
- Get Out the Vote door to door canvassing in Cabarrus County for the municipal elections
- Our 10,000 Rural Voices project where we set out to hear from rural North Carolinians through surveys, one on one conversations and deep canvassing.

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BUILDING "A BIGGER WE" ACROSS THE STATE

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North Carolina is made up of 100 counties: 79 are rural (medium blue) and 15 are semi-rural or transitioning (light blue). Down Home's goal is to unleash the power of a multiracial, working-class rural movement across these counties to transform our state into one that works for us all.

When it comes to protecting Caswell County or coming together as one when times get tough we usually come together. Despite our differences, I know we all love where we are from and can do that more. - B. in Caswell County

I want a fight for a community where all voices are heard, not just the wealthy.
-Courtney in Watauga County

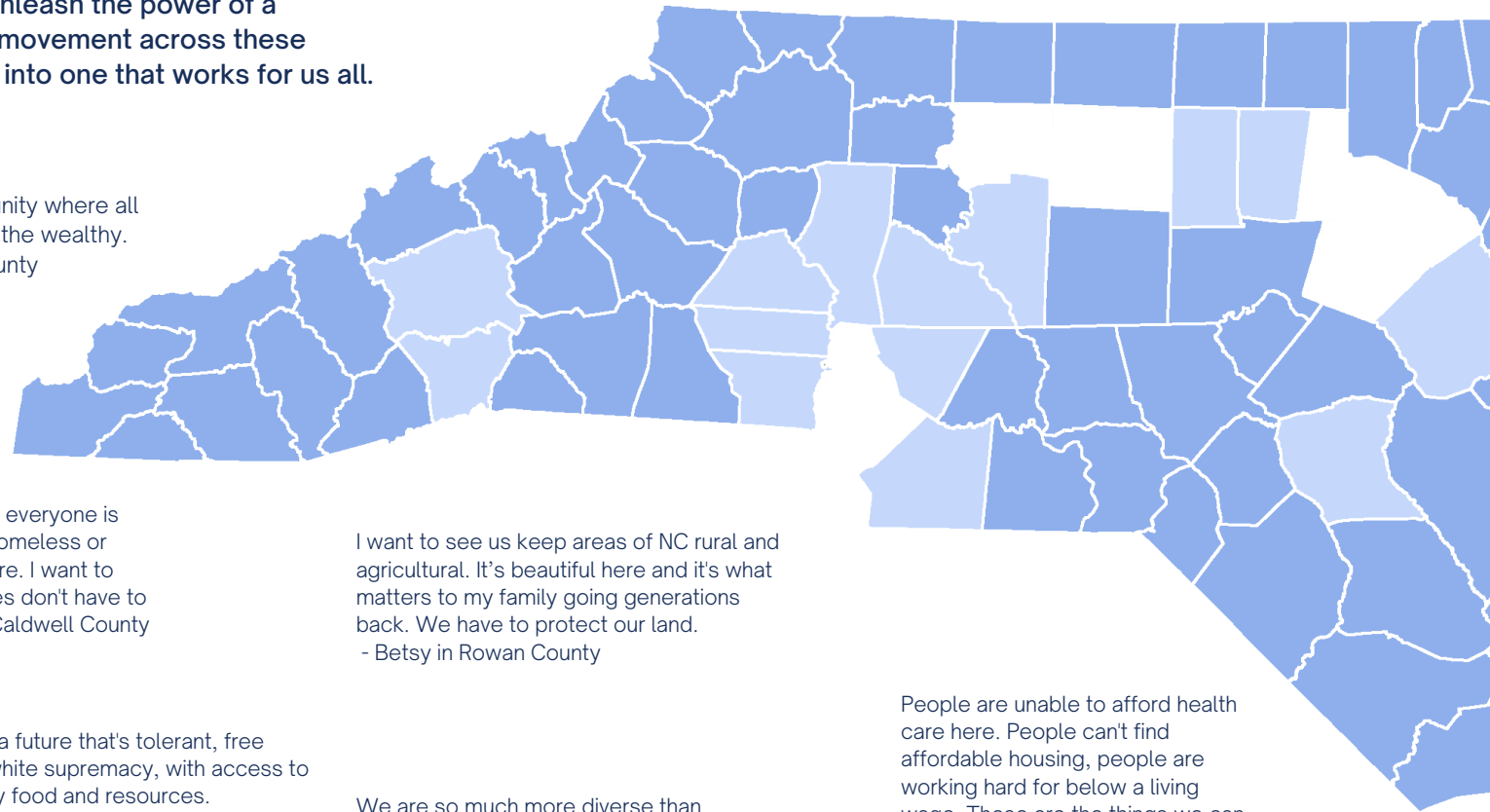
I want to see a community where everyone is taken care of. Where no one is homeless or going without food or medical care. I want to make this a place where minorities don't have to live in fear or poverty.- Sonya in Caldwell County

I want a future that's tolerant, free from white supremacy, with access to healthy food and resources.
- Kia in Cleveland County

I want to see us keep areas of NC rural and agricultural. It's beautiful here and it's what matters to my family going generations back. We have to protect our land.
- Betsy in Rowan County

We are so much more diverse than stereotypes would have you believe, we just have been disempowered and disenfranchised since forever. Our "representatives" truly do not represent us but we know how to change that.
- K. in Alamance County

People are unable to afford health care here. People can't find affordable housing, people are working hard for below a living wage. These are the things we can organize to change.
- Tamara in Lee County



We need to fight for true integration which means support for public schools- financial and emotional.
- Sue in Pasquotank County

I see a lot of substandard housing in my town. There is a lot of poverty and segregation. We need to organize for better housing, less crime and drug abuse, good broadband throughout the county.
-Katheryn in Chowan County

I love living out in the country. People need to respect and protect the land. It is our heritage and legacy to the next generation.
- Susan in Pitt County

I haven't been to a doctor for several years- can't move up in society because I can't work and go to school - my wages suck! This is what I need our leaders to know.
- Zack in Harnett County

Down Home worked with the following statewide coalitions in 2021:

- Health Action Network
- North Carolina United for Survival and Beyond
- Team Democracy
- Southerners for Medicaid Expansion

Down Home worked with key partners this year, including:

- Advance Carolina
- AFL-CIO
- Black Voters Matter
- Blueprint NC
- Carolina Federation
- Carolina Jews for Justice
- Equality NC
- Fayetteville PACT
- Forward Justice
- The Management Center
- National Domestic Workers
- The New North Carolina Project
- The New Rural Project
- NC American Civil Liberties Union
- NC Asian Americans Together
- NC Association of Educators
- NC Black Alliance
- NC Council of Churches
- NC Justice Center
- NC Raise Up
- People's Action
- Poder NC
- Progress NC
- Rural Democracy Initiative
- Sheriffs for Trusting Communities
- Siembra NC
- Southern Vision Alliance
- Vera Institute of Justice
- VISIONS, Inc

In 2021, Down Home brought in thousands of new supporters and members from all across rural North Carolina. We have members and supporters in all 100 of North Carolina's counties. Now we are ready for 2022.

From Member to Candidate to Leader

An interview with Down Home Co-Director Dreama Caldwell.

We sat down with Down Home Co-Director Dreama Caldwell to ask her a bit about her experience being a member of Down Home and about what her vision for Down Home into the future looks like.



Can you explain a little bit about how you came to see electoral politics as an important addition to activism?

Sure. Before coming to Down Home I always was a voter. I voted due to feeling like it was my responsibility to honor my ancestors who fought for my own right to vote. However, I didn't understand the positions I was voting on. I not only didn't know the people I was voting for, I had no clue on their platforms or beliefs.

It was not until attending Down Home's Team Democracy working groups as a member that I was able to understand the connection between the problems in our community and elected officials.

After attending meetings, I realized that we could demonstrate and make social media rants all we wanted but real change would not come until we shift the powers that be. We must elect individuals who represent the community and feel beholden to the residents that they serve. Electoral politics and activism can complement each other.

Down Home's mission is to build up and empower our members into leadership in the community. Your own journey from member to candidate to leader of Down Home is representative of that. Can you share about what you learned as a member that helps you lead our organization today?

I am most grateful for the leadership development opportunities that I had here at Down Home as a member. I learned how to facilitate meetings, about self-interest, and how to hold meaningful one-on-one conversations.

The most useful training that I took as a member was narrative development. It taught me how to use my own story effectively to talk about issues such as criminalization of poverty, living without health insurance, and the struggles of being underemployed.

What are three things you have learned since you took the role of co-director at Down Home?

I have learned that multi-cultural and multi-class movement building is hard. It requires that race and class be put at the forefront. There are so many ways that we have been taught in society to mistrust each other. We are often segregated from daily interactions outside of work and school.



I also have learned that there is so much work to be done in NC. Before going into this leadership position, my view and focus of issues were very localized. Issues such as Medicaid expansion, living wages and other policy related issues are important and should also be a part of our focus. Holding local, state and national elected officials accountable is important to our members and the democratic process.

What are some things that you want to do at Down Home?

I would like to work to grow chapters across the state of NC, giving people in rural places a chance to have their voices heard and be at the table when decisions about their community are made.

I would like to help develop leaders across the state by growing leadership development opportunities for members in our organization. These opportunities are the reason I have been able to transition from member to a member candidate and eventually to this Co-Director position.

What is the most important thing you want a Down Home member to know about our work?

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." That's what Lilla Watson said.

No matter our differences, our liberations are tied together.

There are always things you can contribute as a member, no matter what your schedule is. No contribution to the work is too small. Whether you work a shift on a phone bank, write a postcard, help build our platform, help outreach to add new members, know that is welcomed.



"Thinking back to our hard and humble beginnings, I know Dreama is the leadership we need for our next beginnings. Down Home's future is strengthened by her presence, experience, and her love of our members and the work" - outgoing co-founder and director, Brigid Flaherty.

Read Brigid's reflections on Down Home at dhnc.info/Brigid

SMALL TOWN WINS

Gibsonville Alderman Bryant Crisp won by talking about potholes and water bills.



There were times when Bryant Crisp's campaign account had more in it than his personal bank account. We aren't talking about a lot of money — a few thousand dollars maybe. After all, there isn't a lot of money in running for the Alderman in Gibsonville, a small North Carolina town of just under 9,000 residents.

Sometimes he worried about having enough gas money to make it to a campaign event or to go out talking to voters. To run meant that the father of three couldn't work his usual second job.

"People thought I was crazy," he says. "A father of three, with two jobs, deciding to run for office in my spare time? Everyone I grew up with wanted to know why — why would I do this?"

No doubt there were times he wondered that himself. Middle-aged, working-class, a single dad: It's not common for people like Bryant Crisp to run for office.

Because of his work and the many domestic details of parenting — getting the kids from school, making sure homework is done, making sure groceries are in the fridge — he only had a few hours each evening to campaign.

Crisp and his tiny team — his campaign manager, his friend, and his girlfriend — knocked over 4,000 doors for an election some people didn't even realize was happening. He was often pushing his two year old in a stroller as he walked.

"Everyone puts a campaign sign on the corner, but not everyone knocks on doors. But how are you going to know what people need if you don't talk to them?" he said recently while sitting in a local coffee shop at the heart of Gibsonville.

"I put my face on my campaign signs so people would see who I am and know my face when I showed up at their door. Some of them knew me because I jog around downtown. I figured they'd be more likely to be open to talking if they had seen my face and kind of knew who I was."

His strategy worked. Crisp says that he had deep, meaningful conversations getting to know his neighbors throughout his campaign.

He spoke with a man who was concerned because his water bill had recently doubled; a woman who had been asking for her road to be paved or storm drains to be put in so her yard wouldn't flood when it rained.

He spoke with families living paycheck to paycheck who couldn't afford any tax or rent increases. He spoke with people concerned that the old empty elementary school was a hazard and wanted it torn down, and others who wanted to see it restored.

The hours were long, but he stuck to it not just because he wanted to win, but because the more people he talked to, the more he realized some people didn't even know what an Alderman was or that there was a local election happening.

Crisp says his campaign wasn't just about mobilizing the people who were already engaged, but also working to engage all the people who weren't. To do that, he says, you have to educate folks not because they aren't smart but "because there is someone else who maintains their own power by people not knowing how things work." In Gibsonville, there were many people who didn't know about these "in between" elections. They knew about voting the big years with presidential candidates, but not much about local elections or why they mattered.

"Some people we talked to hadn't voted in two or three elections, and some were totally disengaged. You hear people in the political world complaining about people who don't vote, but a lot of these people haven't even seen a candidate in years."

One evening, Crisp was doing the same thing he had been doing day in and day out: Knocking on doors, handing out flyers, introducing himself to the folks he hoped to help represent.

When the police officers arrived — two of them — they told him there had been a call about "suspicious Black people knocking on doors." Luckily, Crisp was able to show them his campaign materials and continue on his way. When he tells this story today, however, there is a hint of resignation in his voice: He wasn't surprised, but he still asks why it happened.

"I was one of four campaigning, but the only person of color," he says, drinking his coffee while light holiday music plays in the background. "I wonder what the intent was, what the purpose was, for someone to call the police? I am a grown man and I grew up in this county and know how to handle myself. But I thought about my 18 year old son, and what it could have been like if he were there that evening?"

Bryant Crisp knew that race would be an issue when he decided to run. He didn't shy away from it or make any apologies. Issues of race and class would be a part of his campaign. But he stuck to his message: We all have the same needs and by working together in local elections we can start to answer those needs. "Certain groups have an interest in keeping us divided," he observes. "We need to wake up to that."

He also knew that partisan politics would come out to play, even in this non-partisan race. He recounts a long conversation with a woman at a street festival where they agreed on everything each other was saying, but in the end she said that she couldn't vote for him if he was a Democrat. "A pothole isn't a Democrat or a Republican," he reminds us.

While Crisp knew that negative reactions to his candidacy would occur, he is quick to point out that there were only a handful of bad experiences like the time the police were called compared to so many great ones. "I really believe in this town and what we can do here," he says. "Black people would ask me 'Are you sure you want to run?'" but also a lot of white people would say "It's a good thing. It's about time.""

Read more about Bryant Crisp, his campaign, and how he won an election by focusing on local issues on our Reclaiming Rural blog: dhnc.info/GibsonvilleAlderman

WHERE WE ARE GOING: DOWN HOME IN 2022

From Todd Zimmer, Down Home Co-Director and Co-Founder

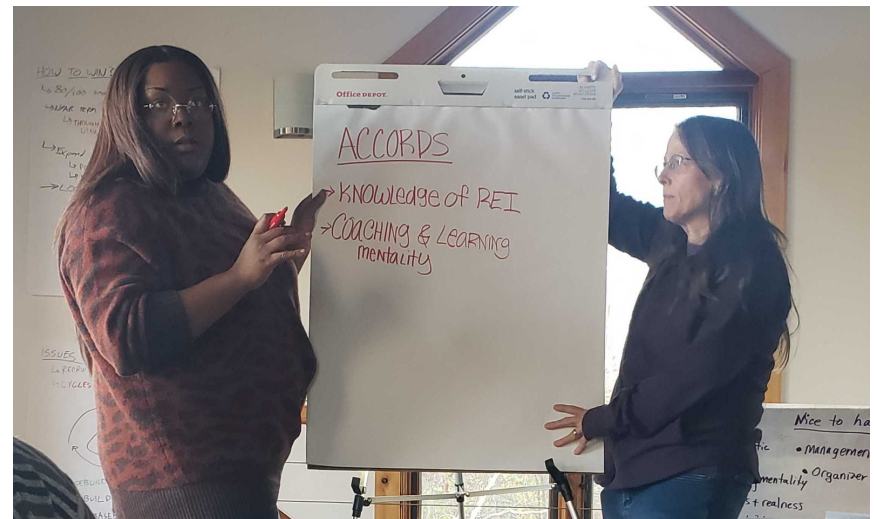
In December, as the year drew toward its close, Down Home's staff gathered together in a little cabin in the woods of Prospect Hill, an unincorporated community in rural Caswell county. There was no cell service out there, but as we departed, our phones lit up with pictures of a beautiful, powerful community event our members were holding in the next county over.

Those images captured the beauty of these first few years and they show the way to a new and different future for North Carolina. There is nothing more hopeful than these small town and rural gatherings of white, Black, and Brown working people.

As beautiful as our current membership is, we admit that we are too small to win on the issues that really matter to our communities. Four years in, we still haven't won Medicaid expansion, meaning that more than 600,000 of our neighbors are still going without the health care they need. Most of our state's rural residents don't yet have a local chapter through which they can fight for their needs. We have more work to do.

This is why next year we will launch the largest coordinated organizing push in our short history. In 2022, Down Home organizers will cover all three regions of North Carolina for the first time: mountains, piedmont, and the east. A people's organization that stretches from the mountains to the sea will be one that has the power to win for all of us.

So much will be new next year: New members, new relationships, and new challenges as we continue to stretch ourselves and our organization.



Down Home staff members reflecting on 2021 and making plans for our upcoming work in 2022

We will launch new member training programs, new regional chapter cohorts, and a new fellowship program to prepare the next generation of rural working-class leaders

At the same time, our fundamental methods will remain the same: Front porch conversations, careful listening canvasses, and chapter meetings. Our members will continue to build a working-class mandate that will guide our work and endorsements. We will follow up those endorsements with a powerful midterm election program that can not only win elections, but will grow our movement.

Leaving that Caswell county cabin, we looked out on the December landscape with fresh eyes. Down Home organizers will soon knock on the doors of the houses and trailers we passed. The only traffic we encountered was at the local school, where hard-working parents were picking up their children. We wondered if future Down Home members were among these kids. As we traveled through the little no-stoplight towns, we envisioned gatherings of the members who will come together in these small places to make a great change for all of North Carolina's working people.

Thank you for helping us build a Down Home that is both powerful enough to win and patient enough to hold each of us in our beautiful difference.

Want to follow our work into 2022? Follow us on social media or our blog.



Down Home members in action. Top photo by A. Crider, bottom photos from staff.

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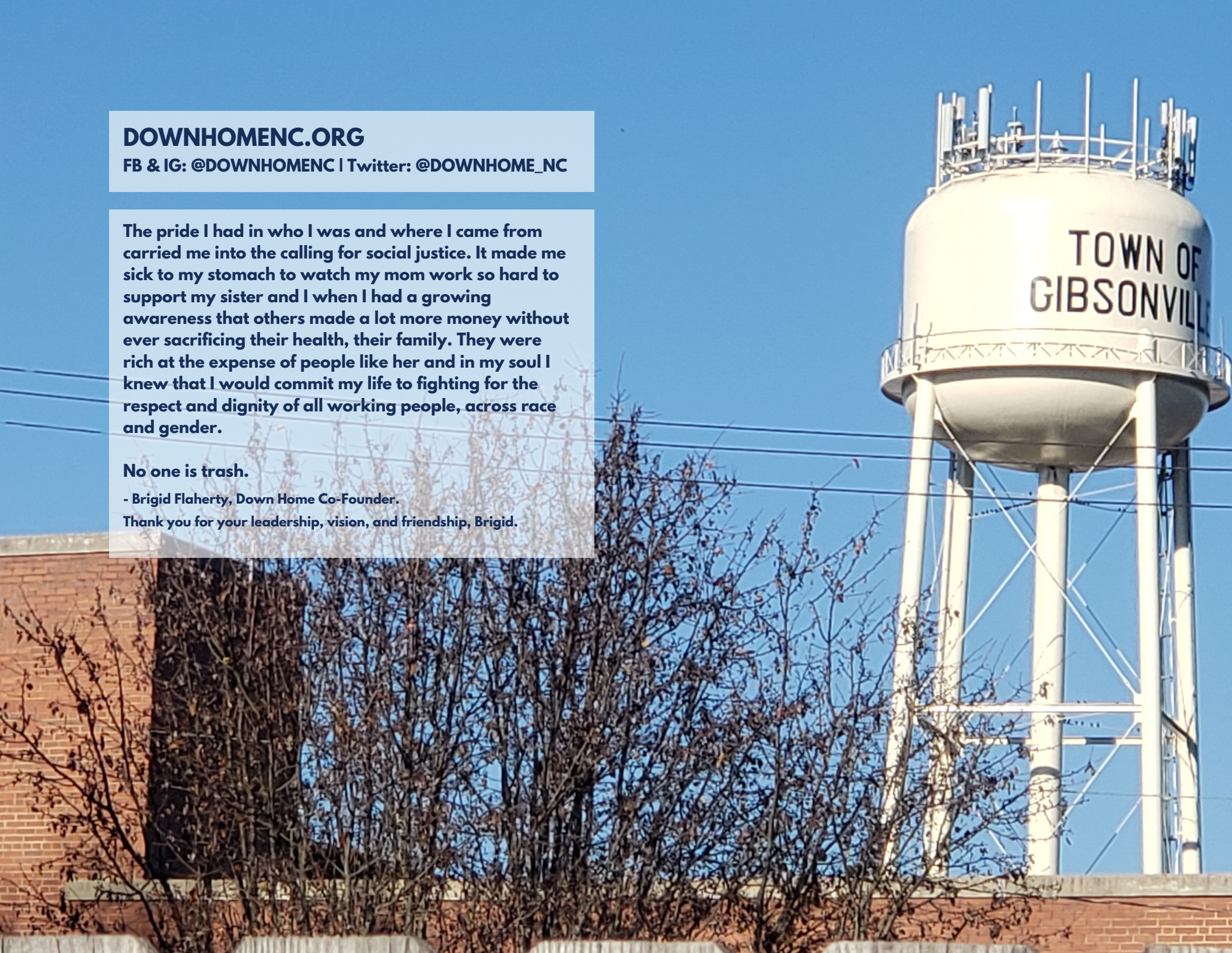
The pride I had in who I was and where I came from carried me into the calling for social justice. It made me sick to my stomach to watch my mom work so hard to support my sister and I when I had a growing awareness that others made a lot more money without ever sacrificing their health, their family. They were rich at the expense of people like her and in my soul I knew that I would commit my life to fighting for the respect and dignity of all working people, across race and gender.

No one is trash.

- Brigid Flaherty, Down Home Co-Founder.

Thank you for your leadership, vision, and friendship, Brigid.

**TOWN OF
GIBSONVILLE**

A tall, white, cylindrical water tower stands prominently against a clear blue sky. The words "TOWN OF GIBSONVILLE" are painted in large, black, sans-serif capital letters on the side of the tower. The tower is supported by several white legs. In the foreground, there are bare, dark brown trees and a portion of a red brick wall. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a sunny day.