

The Miami Herald

July 15, 2012

Circulation: 160,505

A dignified dwelling

Two Miami design industry professionals have furnished a home for a woman and her three children who are transitioning out of homelessness, the first of what they hope will be many projects.

By Alexa Lopez

Rocio Almanzar, who has spent about seven years in and out of homeless shelters and rehabilitation programs, did not have many ideas for the décor of her new apartment.

Rather, a teary-eyed Almanzar, 35, said she was grateful to have a place for her and her three little girls to call their own.

“Make yourself at home,” she told Miami businesswomen Beth Arrowood and Charlotte Dunagan at the unveiling last week of her Little Havana apartment. “It feels good to say that.”

Arrowood, owner of the Design District’s NIBA Rug Collections, and Dunagan, interior designer behind Atmosphere Creations, also in the Design District, led the project to furnish Almanzar’s new apartment. They teamed with the Dallas-based nonprofit Dwell with Dignity, founded by interior designer Lisa Robinson about three years ago.

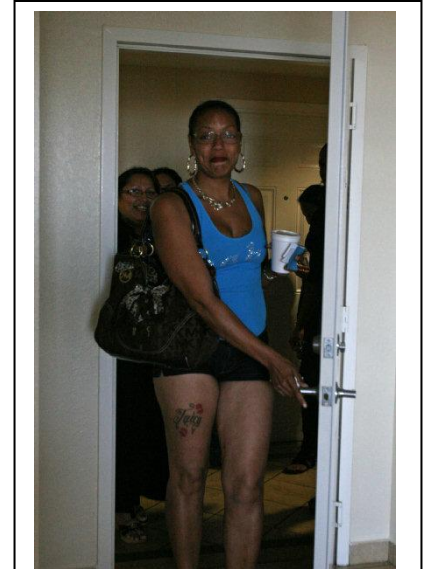
“I read this Oprah book and it said to find what it is that you’re passionate about and what you’re talented at, and then find a way to give that back to your community — that’s the secret to happiness,” Robinson said. “It’s often the people who cannot spend the money on the design who can benefit the most.”

Dwell with Dignity partners with local agencies that have a track record in helping families find housing and transition out of homelessness. The nonprofit then seeks out those in the design community. This is Dwell’s 22nd project; it is the first outside Dallas.

The collaboration began when an NIBA employee and the company’s public relations representative attended a conference for interior design bloggers in Los Angeles this February. When Arrowood and Dunagan heard about Dwell with Dignity, they immediately contacted Robinson to get involved.

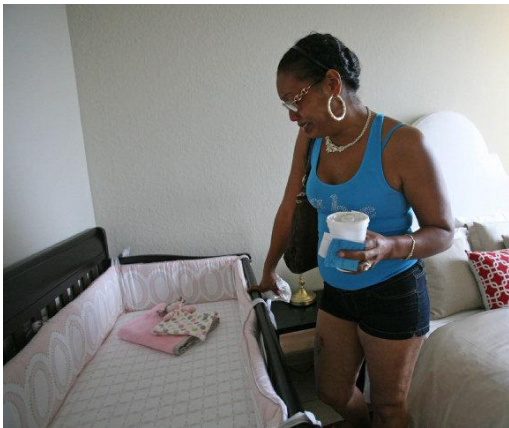
“Design in general is a very personal thing,” Dunagan said. “It’s where you come home after your day and unwind. For these people, it’s going to feel like a safety feeling.”

Arrowood and Dunagan decorated Almanzar’s apartment with donations from businesses in the Design District, as well as from their personal items. MIYO Home donated tables, Regina Suarez Design and Manufacturing reupholstered several pieces, and illustrator Sandra Lucia painted watercolor portraits of Almanzar’s twin girls.



Rocio Almanza, who was previously homeless, views her new apartment July 6. The home was provided by Carrfour, a supportive housing agency, and decorated and furnished by Dwell with Dignity, a Dallas-based nonprofit that decorates and furnishes homes for families transitioning out of homelessness. Two local businesswomen from the Design District led the project.

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Rocio Almanza, who was previously homeless, views the crib for her 4-month-old infant in her new apartment July 6.

“We’re trying to create a sense of family in the design industry,” Arrowood said. “This is about making a difference in people’s lives and changing the community of Miami, while making a difference within the design community itself.”

Arrowood and Dunagan hope to start their own Miami-Dade County chapter of Dwell with Dignity.

Almanzar’s home is a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment with a family room, dining area and kitchen. It is fully furnished and even has a television, something Almanzar’s daughters have never had.

“Almanzar said the thing she was most looking forward to was to be able to cook a meal for her family,” Dunagan said. “That,

right there, is giving education, values and a foundation for her girls. How many people a day don’t sit at a table and have dinner? It’s something we take for granted.”

Almanzar, who has 18-month-old twins and a 4-month-old, said she feels extremely grateful for the “angels” at Dwell with Dignity.

“This means security for my children and a brighter future,” she said. “I hope nothing but the best. I hope that they can learn from my experiences, and my dreams for them are to be a million times better than me.”

Almanzar moved to Miami in 2003 from Brooklyn. After a series of bad decisions, she said, she turned to drugs and lost everything. It was around 2010 that Almanzar made the decision to “get my life together.”

After moving in and settling down, Almanzar hopes to become a certified addiction professional so she can help others with drug problems.

“I want to inspire and motivate them and tell them that if I could do it, they can do it as well,” Almanzar said.

The Little Havana-based agency Carrfour, which operates 11 buildings for the homeless, connected Almanzar with Dwell. The agency requires a screening process, including drug testing, before families can be considered for housing. It also provides services such as financial literacy classes, home ownership preparation, and helping children enroll in school.

“It’s amazing what just putting a roof over someone’s head can do to turn their lives around,” said Carrfour CEO and President Stephanie Berman-Eisenberg. “Everything seems to fall into place once they have a place to receive mail and a phone call.”



Beth Arrowood, Rocio Almanza, who was previously homeless, and Charlotte Dunagan, from left to right, sit together in Almanza’s new apartment on July 6.