



Denayha Cotton

Advocacy Success

“Bubbly. Friendly. Easily Excitable.”

That’s how Denayha Cotton describes herself. But what defines her is the way she shows up for others. For Denayha, community is not just something she’s a part of, it’s something she actively builds. It’s the way she shares food, checks in on people, and prioritizes connection with intention, making sure others feel seen and

supported. **That sense of connection has become the foundation of how she navigates the world.**

“It’s a way that I could show love for my community,” she said. “We’re here for the highs and the lows...that sisterhood is strong.”

Before coming to New York, Denayha had built a different kind of life. She worked as a massage therapist for seven years and ran her own business, creating stability and independence on her own terms. But that stability didn’t last. “One month I had everything...and the next month I didn’t.”

Advocacy, for her, is about making sure those voices are not overlooked. “You miss a lot of good people by judging them prematurely.”

After losing both her business and her apartment, she made the decision to move. The transition was immediate and disorienting. What she found, however, was not what she expected.

Within the shelter system, Denayha discovered a kind of community she hadn’t experienced before. One rooted in shared understanding, mutual care, and a collective sense of responsibility for one another. **In a space where resources are limited, people show up for each other in ways that often go unseen. That experience reshaped how she understands people and how she understands herself.**

“I actually have a better heart now than I did.”

Grounded in her faith and shaped by her experience, Denayha has come to see this chapter of her life not only as a challenge, but as a turning point. It deepened her sense of empathy, strengthened her relationships, and shifted what she values most.

Today, Denayha is channeling that perspective into advocacy. Through her involvement in the Consumer Advisory Board, **she has stepped into spaces where she can speak directly to the realities of homelessness; bringing lived experience into conversations that often happen without that level of expertise.**



Her approach is rooted in both curiosity and care. She wants to understand how systems work, but more importantly, how they can work better for people navigating them every day. Advocacy, for her, is about making sure those voices are not overlooked. **“You miss a lot of good people by judging them prematurely.”**

Looking back, Denayha doesn't define her journey by what she lost. Instead, she focuses on what she's gained: a deeper sense of connection, a stronger understanding of herself, and a community that continues to shape who she is becoming.

She is focused on building forward: finding work, continuing to grow, and living a life that reflects her values.

“In just a few short months, Denayha has grown into a confident and impactful advocate, bringing both authenticity and insight to every conversation. During an advocacy day we held in Albany, she navigated meetings with ease, thoughtfully sharing her story and adapting her message to connect with each office and discussion. We are excited to celebrate her success and look forward to seeing the continued impact of her advocacy, leadership, and commitment to building meaningful connections within our community.”

Nathalie Interiano, VP of Policy and Advocacy