

A POSSIBLE PIEDMONT

Stormin' Norman and Cookin' Carolina



The year is 2025.

Norman grew up on a family farm with his mother Mary, dad and brother. While he recognized the sometimes tenuous but important role their farm played in providing fresh, local produce to the region, and was happy to see that policymakers were beginning to implement programs that would help negate the always looming financial need to sell off sections of their property, he was restless and wanted to see the world, so he joined the military rather than stay back home in the family business.

He met his wife Carolina during a tour of Europe. She is a native of Spain, where she always took public transportation and never learned to drive. In the Piedmont, Carolina can walk to town on nice sidewalks for some things, but needed a car for most of the necessities of daily living, leading her to learn to drive and get her driver's license. Whenever she could, she rode her bicycle on the county's new bike lanes, which reminded her of her youth.

In the army, Norman was a corpsman, with an emphasis on physical therapy. He served for eight years but felt called to return to the rolling hills of the Piedmont of North Carolina. He worried about how he would make a living, with a wife and a set of twins, but his mother was still in good health and she could help the family get established while Norman completed a degree in physical therapy. They lived with her for one year and worked as they could on the family farm. Carolina fell in love with the beautiful land and was a huge help with the vegetable crops because her family grew their own big garden back in Andalusia. With Norman's help, she takes the farms' produce and Mary's fruit pies to the local farmer's market. She looks forward to chatting with her regulars, almost as much as they like learning how and where the vegetables are grown, and her tips for cooking them up just right.

Carolina learned to be such a good cook from her grandmother and her great grandmother. She brought all her family's treasured recipes with her to America. During the week, she works in a local barbecue restaurant where the African American owners, Harry and Sally Wilson, have been trying her new dishes, for which they have become quite well known. In return, they taught her all about grits!

Norman and Carolina bought their first home on the GI Bill. They settled in a charming small town near the family farm, in a community where they could walk from home to church, nearby restaurants, parks, and neighborhood services. They liked the houses with smaller footprints, smaller lots and narrower streets, where traffic moved slower and neighbors waved hello from their front porches. Unfortunately, the developer was not able to get his country store approved for the neighborhood, so it was not a community with a full mix of uses, but it was a start for the region and they loved it.

Because their compact neighborhood is within walking distance of the historic downtown center, Norman and Carolina can get by with one car. Most of their friends live in more typical, larger lot, single-family homes outside of town and have to drive everywhere, but she can walk to town on the days that Norman has to take the car to work. She is impressed that her county was far-sighted enough to give the developer of her neighborhood a set of incentives to build this kind of close-to-town place, instead of one in a distant, green field. Some policy makers in the region seem to agree. Carolina read in the paper that other counties in the Triad are considering allowing more compact neighborhoods to be built in their towns and cities as well.

Fortunately, Carolina can do most of her traveling for the other requirements of daily living on the bus, and she was able to walk the children to their schools when they were growing up. Back in Spain, she and her two brothers walked to school, no matter the weather, and she wanted her children to have those same values. That's the primary reason they bought where they did.

Norman and Carolina have a granny flat on the back of their house that they rent out to a small Hmong family, with a single mother and two children. Because there is an inadequate supply of rental property in the region, she feels quite lucky to have found the small apartment with Norman and Carolina. She is working hard to save money to bring other family members from Southeast Asia to join her in working on the huge flower farm. Her small rent payments add to Norman and Carolina's monthly income and they are proud to share their home with a family just starting out on the American dream.

Norman has a good job in physical therapy at a large regional medical center, but his drive is almost an hour, without traffic. It used to be longer but there is a little less congestion due to increased ridership on busses. He drives his old car but wishes he could use public transportation and spend less of his monthly income on gas. He has heard that next year there may be a bus that would take him all the way into the city without having to change busses two times. This would allow him to read and study

during the commute and save gas money, and would give Carolina the flexibility of having the car for local trips.

Norman's work is busier and busier, along with his volunteer time at his church. The aging population requires physical therapy and he works to keep people moving as long as possible, especially now that there are some new sidewalks and greenways throughout the region. Also, younger people have begun to move back to the area and they like to play sports, sometimes with injuries that need Norman's attention. Besides, the air quality is measurably better with less congestion on the roads, so people like to be more active outside, and he can help with most of their injuries born of overly enthusiastic athleticism.

Norman and Carolina are trying to start a community garden at their church but they are meeting resistance from the neighborhood's HOA. Much to Carolina's dismay, they seem to think that a garden would cause the neighborhood to look shabby somehow and not clean and modern. But she isn't giving up. She knows of a small, community garden recently opened in a poor, immigrant neighborhood where she has many friends. If they could build one there, why not here?

As much as Carolina feels appreciated by the restaurant she is restless to have her own business in the little downtown, a Spanish bakery. More and more shops are springing up with an international flair. The region has intentionally supported small businesses through its Piedmont Products program, based on the Made in America model, and with its provision of broadband access across the Triad allowing entrepreneurs access to an even larger market.

Because of downtown businesses operated by the burgeoning immigrant community, people come from all over the region to sample their wares. Carolina sees the different immigrants as adding to her community, and the new tax revenues and new jobs have added to the economic stability of her town. In the end, she realizes that this strengthened tax base has contributed to new playground equipment, better parks, improved sidewalks, and walking trails for all to enjoy.

But first, Carolina knows that she must learn more about how to write a business plan and run a business, so she is taking online classes in management through a local community college. Through her lessons, she has discovered that there are new markets, and historic tax credits that could help her purchase and renovate an old downtown building, adding to her hope that she can make this bakery a reality. Also, through the school's online discussion groups, she has met both budding entrepreneurs and displaced mill workers, some of whom, like Carolina, have received scholarships

from a coalition of local foundations, which understand that both re-training workers with new skills, and flourishing small businesses will help energize the entire region's economy.

These days, money for Norman and Carolina is not quite so tight. They have a bit more to spend since they only pay for one car and the twins are now on their own. Often, the weekends will find them taking advantage of the growing number of nearby natural resources that have been protected. They fish in a rented boat, take picnics, and camp overnight, all within a short drive of their house. Because of the increased tax revenue from the region's growing economy, the town has provided more neighborhood parks, soccer fields have sprung up, and they are packed with kids' teams. The immigrant community and local kids all love the game, and Carolina is excited to hear people using Spanish and English with equal ease during the matches.

Norman and Carolina can see a future for themselves in the Piedmont. Their own children are happily graduated from local colleges, although Cindy wanted to go up north to school. The family just couldn't quite afford to send her that far away, especially without adequate scholarship support. Carolina hopes that more funding becomes available for special programs, but until it does, she still takes time to volunteer in the public schools, which are on the rise again, working to teach English to Spanish-speaking children. She has even been asked to teach a bi-lingual family planning class at the local high school, hoping to help adolescents better understand the control they have in shaping their lives. Norman's brother, John, is even considering returning to teach here again to be close to family. Carolina smiles when she thinks of the joy that creased Mary's face when she heard of that possibility. Mary must have made six pies that night out of excitement.

The twins, Cindy and Ned, haven't found the kind of high skilled work in the region that they want, so they have moved to a larger, more prosperous region to the south. Carolina and Norman still hold out hope that more businesses will be attracted to the Piedmont and the kids can move back home. Already, a few, new, cleaner manufacturing plants have announced their plans to relocate to the area citing lower taxes and a growing group of well/re-trained workers. They all know that they have more to do to bring the community together around common goals, but Carolina and Norman have seen progress, enough so that they are proud to call the Piedmont Triad home.