

AFFORDING NEW YORK

# How a Housing Organizer and Her Son Live on \$89,000 Near Central Park



By Jeffery C. Mays Photographs by Anna Watts April 27, 2026

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How can people possibly afford to live in one of the most expensive cities on the planet? It's a question New Yorkers hear a lot, often delivered with a mix of awe, pity and confusion.

We surveyed hundreds of New Yorkers about how they spend, splurge and save. We found that many people — rich, poor or somewhere in between — live life as a series of small calculations that add up to one big question: [What makes living in New York worth it?](#)

By the time their son was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum when he was 18 months old, Angela Donadelle and her child's father, Michael Jones, were no longer together.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the height of the crack epidemic, the pair had fallen into drug addiction. They both went into recovery after they discovered Ms. Donadelle was pregnant.

"He saved my life," Ms. Donadelle, 66, said of her son. "My life wasn't in order, and then God sent me him and changed everything."

Together, Ms. Donadelle and Mr. Jones forged what would become a three decade commitment to carefully and jointly parenting their son, Christopher Jones, now 32, so that he could be independent when they were gone. Ms. Donadelle, who grew up in Harlem, considered moving to find more affordable housing, but believed that Christopher, who is highly functioning, would have access to better therapeutic and educational services in New York City.

Randi Levine, the policy director for Advocates for Children of New York, said New York has high quality programs for autistic children. Medicaid also pays for more services for children and families here than in other states, said Brigit Hurley, the chief program officer for The Children's Agenda. Both agree that access to services can sometimes be limited.

"I could have taken my degree and moved down south and made more money," said Ms. Donadelle, who graduated from Boston College with a degree in marketing and business management. She now works as a housing organizer at [Good Old Lower East Side](#), a housing preservation organization in Lower Manhattan. "I had friends that moved to other places, but would I be able to accommodate the needs of Christopher?"

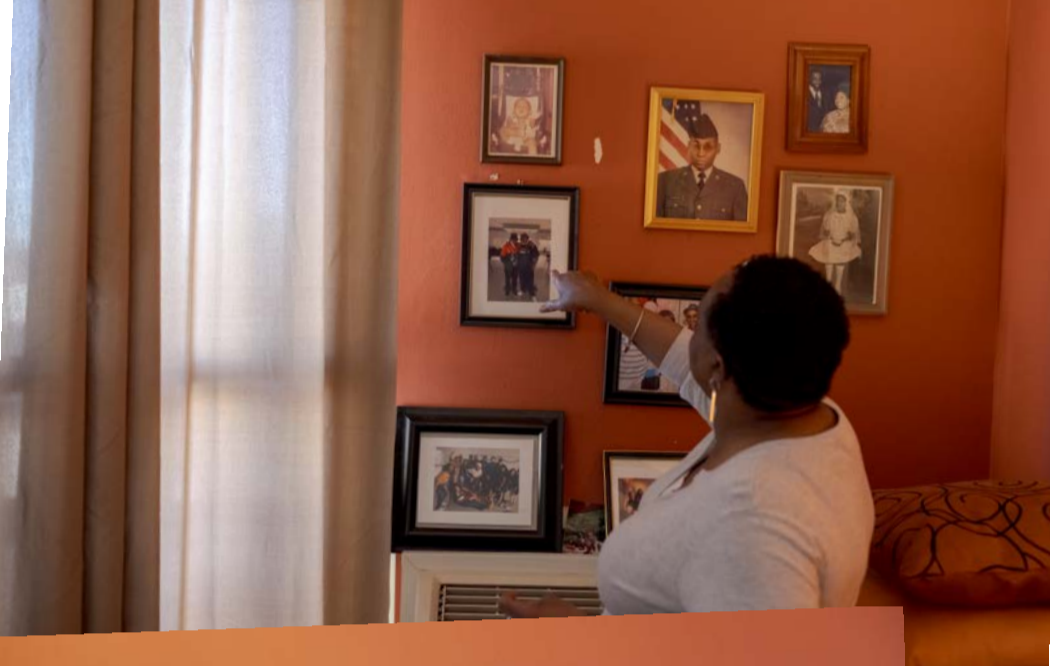
Staying in New York City meant that she had to come up with a plan. Even though they were no longer romantically involved, Mr. Jones sometimes lived with Ms. Donadelle and their son at the Lakeview Apartments, a four-building, 446-unit complex in a prime location at East 107th Street and Fifth Avenue in East Harlem.

From her terrace on one of the building's highest floors, Ms. Donadelle has a view of the Empire State Building and Central Park, including the Conservatory Garden and reservoir. She pays **\$1,950** per month for her 750-square-foot two-bedroom apartment.

"I knew that if I was short on the rent, I could ask him for money, and he would give it to me," Ms. Donadelle said of Mr. Jones, adding that they split the **\$250** per month they spent on food and the **\$350** per month for cable, internet and phone service.

"We were real good friends," she said. "He had girlfriends and I had boyfriends. They just never came to our house."

Ms. Donadelle fought to keep the building she lives in affordable.



Ms. Donadelle and her son, Christopher Jones, enjoy walking their dog, Milo, in Central Park.

## The End of a Partnership

That help ended in January 2024 when Mr. Jones, a security guard at a building for older adults, died of a heart attack. Pictures of Mr. Jones, who was known for his love of fashion, adorn the apartment.

Ms. Donadelle tears up when talking about Mr. Jones and their joint effort to raise their son. "We were a team," she said. "If I was at work, he took care of Chris, got him to the therapies. And that's why it got harder when he died."

But their plan paid off. Years ago, specialists told Ms. Donadelle that Christopher would not be capable of graduating high school. He went on to graduate high school with honors and then earned an associate degree from Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn with honors before completing his bachelor's degree at Hunter College in Manhattan.

Christopher works part-time as a package handler for FedEx where he earns **\$24,000** per year. Ms. Donadelle earns **\$60,000** per year from her job as a housing organizer and about **\$5,000** per year from teaching a course about the social determinants of health at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

A few years ago, the Lakeview Apartments converted from the 1970s era [Mitchell-Llama affordability program](#) to Project-Based Rental Assistance, meaning that residents would still be allowed to continue paying 30 percent of their income for rent. Ms. Donadelle and her son qualify for a small discount because of his diagnosis and her age, but her rent increased by **\$400** after the conversion when the market rate value of her apartment and her income went up.

At the time, there was a fear that the complex would become market rate housing because of its desirable location. Ms. Donadelle, who first moved to the building with her family when she was 17, helped in the fight to keep the building affordable. She has pictures with local politicians who joined in the effort.

"Some people don't think we deserve this view," she said. "But we have a community here. Everybody knows us, everybody knows Chris."

Some of Ms. Donadelle's specialties are jerk chicken, lasagna and oxtails.



Ms. Donadelle said her son's success is in part because she found a way to stay in the city.

## Bulk Buys for Home Cooking

Money, Ms. Donadelle said, can sometimes be tight, but she considers herself to be both resourceful and frugal. She cooks at home to save money. Some of her specialties are jerk chicken, lasagna, oxtails and peas and rice. The **\$40** she spends at the butcher on a batch of oxtails, once considered a cheap cut of meat that has now become expensive, is a treat for them.

Ms. Donadelle buys in bulk and shrink wraps cuts of meat to store in her freezer. Bins in the corner of the terrace hold toilet paper and other supplies bought in bulk to save money.

She also comparison shops, sometimes driving with friends to stores where the cost of fresh fruits and vegetables is cheaper than in her neighborhood. A food pantry that she helped connect with her building also provides about **\$50** per month worth of food.

Ms. Donadelle and Christopher share a family cellphone plan with a relative and pay about **\$150** per month. She recently gave up smoking for Lent, which was costing at least \$120 per month, and plans not to return to smoking. Christopher saves **\$200** per month for an emergency fund. Transportation costs them about **\$60** per month and they budget about **\$80** per month for lunch at work.

## The Rewards of City Life

For fun, they enjoy walks in Central Park with their dog, Milo, who originally belonged to Mr. Jones. They spend about **\$800** a year on shots, grooming and supplies. They spend about **\$125** per month eating out and going to the movies. Ms. Donadelle's Spotify subscription costs **\$20** per month.

As she looks back on her decision to fight for her home, Ms. Donadelle has no regrets. Her son's success, she believes, is linked to her decision to find a way to stay in the city.

Christopher is an artist whose sketchbooks dot the apartment. Every Friday, Christopher attends his social group at YAI, which provides services for people with developmental disabilities. He has even begun doing some speaking engagements about normalizing people with disabilities.

"I was literally raised here," Christopher said while admiring the view from his terrace. "This building, like this city, is my home. It's been good to me."

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Produced by Eden Weingart, Alice Fang and Eve Edelhelt.

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