



CHICAGO

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RED BULL FLYING  
SEPT 25 26

THIS CHICAGO NATIVE'S  
FRESH PERSPECTIVE, HARD-CORE  
DETERMINATION AND VIRTUAL  
COURAGE ARE FUELING A NEW  
PARADIGM FOR RENT-TO-OWN

*Now:*

## Sandra Edwards

**S**ANDRA EDWARDS INTENDS TO LIVE TO BE 100. Or more. And once you spend some time talking with her, you understand why it's going to happen. ★ "I've got a grandmother way back on my dad's side of the family who was a Blackfoot Indian," Edwards notes. "She lived to be 116, so I've got some good longevity DNA working for me." ★ That familial foundation might help, but the real reason Edwards will be a centenarian is because she has *decided* she will be. That's how determined she is. It's a determination that has gotten her through a colorful and multifaceted life so far—including single-motherhood, homelessness and a wrongful arrest, not to mention careers in fashion, the military, real estate and big rigs. And now she is taking on rent-to-own in her own way; she is reworking the RTO business model and getting ready to run with it. ★ "I was a tomboy," Edwards notes, smiling. "I wanted to be doing things most girls didn't like to do. But I was also a daddy's girl. My dad was a great mechanic, and when I was a high-school sophomore, he got me a baby-blue Lincoln Continental Mark IV with a cream-colored top. So when I had car troubles, I would go to my dad to fix them. But I also got a lesson in auto repair. He would ask, 'So what's it doing?' and 'Well, why do you think it's doing that?' And I'm thinking, Why are you asking me? But it taught me how to work through the process, how to figure things out."

By KRISTEN CARD

PHOTOGRAPHS by RANDY MICHAEL KORWIN

**E**dwards was born and grew up on the south side of Chicago, the fourth child of six siblings—four girls and two boys—and she was the only one her father bought a car for (yep, daddy’s girl). Despite her tomboy tendencies, she graduated with a major in dressmaking from Dunbar Vocational High School; the natural next stop was fashion design school.

So Edwards moved to Los Angeles and modeled while attending the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising for two years, until she was too homesick and had to return to the Midwest. She enrolled in beauty culture/cosmetology school and became a licensed hairstylist. She met and married her first husband and they became unexpectedly pregnant.

Once her son was born, Edwards joined the United States Army, hoping to provide him with security. She spent the next eight years as an administrative specialist, moving her family from post to post to post, until being secure just didn’t seem as important as being settled.

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Edwards got out of the military, went home to Chicago and got into real estate, working as a property manager and leasing consultant. But when she and her husband divorced, it ruined her financially; she was forced to sell her duplex and file for bankruptcy.

“I decided to move to Florida,” Edwards recalls. “I wanted to be somewhere sunny and wonderful, but I didn’t have anywhere to live. So I called a homeless shelter in Kissimmee and made a reservation, like we were going on vacation.” Edwards, her son and the man she was dating drove to the Sunshine State and moved

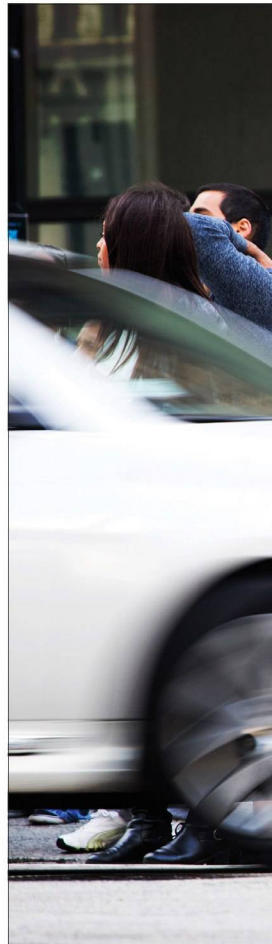
into the shelter; four days later, still recovering from her divorce, Edwards wed her boyfriend, a move she calls “without a doubt, the biggest mistake of my life.” Within weeks, in a fit of jealousy, he falsely accused Edwards of assault with a deadly weapon, had her arrested and her son put into foster care. Eventually, the charges were dropped and some good samaritans helped Edwards get her son back, get a job and get settled into a new Floridian life. Which is where she found rent-to-own.

**I**t was a Sunday and I was just driving around Miami. I saw a store that said ‘rent-to-own custom wheels and tires,’” Edwards recounts. “I pulled up, because I had never seen anything like that before. So I’m looking in the windows at all these shiny rims and tires, and I’m thinking ‘Wow, that’s an interesting idea.’”

The concept clearly made an impression because three years later, Edwards had moved back to Chicago and was working as a semi driver when she decided to explore the possibility of opening up a rent-to-own wheel-and-tire store. She paired up with RTO veteran Jason Prendergast, intending to open in Florida, but the deal didn’t work out. Following some logistical delays, APRO General Counsel Ed Winn III connected her with Dan Companion, former president of Florida-based Rent’N Go Custom Wheels and Tires, and he encouraged her to launch her own business in Chicago.

“Most people think of wheels as rims,” Edwards says. “But in Chicago, rent-to-own rims won’t work for my business model. Our winters are eight months long and people remove their rims during the wintertime. So even though our name is Wheelz On Time, I decided to do tires only. I created a business model for working-class people who need sets of tires, but can’t afford to buy them. I’m essentially a tire broker, but many of my clients call me the Tire Angel.”

Edwards launched Wheelz On Time ([www.wheelzontime.com](http://www.wheelzontime.com)), an online, lease-to-own tire financing company, in 2014. Here’s how it works: Edwards partners with tire retailers all over the Chicago metropolitan area who are willing to charge her reduced prices for tires and wholesale costs for installations. New clients go to her website, complete an application and submit qualifying documents. They must be 18 or older, earn



a steady income of \$1,000 per month or more and have an active checking account and vehicle registration under their name. Once she has approved them, Edwards contacts a tire retailer close to the client and schedules installation. She pays her retail partner and the client makes weekly, biweekly or monthly payments to her via an automatic bank-account deduction on the client's payday. Clients get new tires, partners get new business and Edwards gets a profitable new rent-to-own paradigm.

"I've got about a hundred clients currently," she says. "Once I began getting clients, I was surprised, because they tend to be people in the suburbs with good incomes and nice cars who need to drive a lot, but just don't have the cash or credit available for a whole new set of tires, which typically run about \$700 to \$1,200."

Edwards says keeping the company virtual not only keeps her overhead costs low—and therefore, client pricing down—but also gives her a much bigger service-location footprint. Her current client radius extends 30 to 60 miles from downtown Chicago in all directions. Still,

Edwards works to establish as personal a connection as possible with each new client.

"Right now, I try to go to the installation appointments myself," Edwards affirms. "I meet the clients, go over their lease with them, give them their copies and we get a chance to talk face-to-face. It helps create that relationship, so they know that even though I'm an on-line business, I'm still an individual."

**T**o date, Edwards' revolutionary rent-to-own business is thriving and she is ready to leverage up. She has experienced only two lease defaults, been nominated for a Chicago Innovation Award (sponsored by Kuczumarski Innovation), pitched to Detroit's Pipeline Fellowship (angel investing for women), chatted with the founders of Belle Michigan (a Midwestern investment fund) and was just selected one of five finalists for the South Side Pitch competition sponsored by the University of Chicago Law School.



“I’m preparing for the next round of funding,” Edwards confirms. “I am happy to work with angel investors, but I really want someone already in the rent-to-own industry to partner with. My vision for the business is to go national. All I have to do is build relationships with retailers; the bulk of work otherwise is simply collecting documents and processing paperwork. As a U.S. veteran, I would love to create data-entry positions for disabled vets who could work at home. But the next step is growing and developing my retail partnership program—especially across the Midwest, because there’s just nothing like what I’m doing here yet.”

Edwards remains close to her 85-year-old dad, who nurtured her love of driving and who now lives in Selma, Alabama, as well as to her 80-year-old mother and older sister Brenda, who live close by in the Windy City. Trusting that the third time’s the charm, Edwards has been happily married for the past four years to James, who directs GED testing for Cook County. Her son, Omari, is almost 30, married and has two beautiful children who call her “Granny”: a girl, Jadiah, who is 11; and a boy, Giovanni, 6. They live in Appleton, Wisconsin, less than 200 miles away.

Again and again, Edwards expresses deep gratitude for her family and for the people who have helped her get Wheelz On Time off and rolling. She makes special mention of her father-in-law, Dr. Donald Edwards, who helped fund her launch, as well as Prendergast, Winn,

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Companion, RNR’s Larry Sutton, Melissa Brown of the Illinois Small Business Development Center and Donna Rockin of the Knapp Entrepreneurial Center. At this point in her life, Edwards is feeling profoundly blessed and is determined to spread the blessings around.

“I have been through some things, so to be where I am right now is nothing but the grace of God,” she effuses. “For me, rent-to-own is about helping people. I’m helping people get things they need. When you commute 30 or 40 miles every day to work, you need safe tires. They are not a luxury, they are a necessity. Being able to provide people with what they need makes me happy about what I’m doing. This business is my ministry, to give back because of where I’ve been and what I have been through.” ★

*Kristen Card is a freelance business writer based in Austin, Texas.*



James and Sandra Edwards