

Homeless family fights to keep son off streets

Natalie Pate Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The decision was made — Claudia Campos and her eight-year-old son Jimmy would stay at Simonka Place women's shelter in Keizer. Her husband, Oscar, and their 14-year-old son AJ would sleep on the streets.

The Campos family had been homeless for over a month, but they'd been able to keep the children from sleeping outside until July of last year.

In Marion County, there are few shelters that will take full families. And they frequently come with waiting lines weeks or months long.

Many families have to decide whether it's better to split up, especially when they have sons between the ages of 12 and 18 — they are too old to stay at the women's and family shelters, but too young to stay at the men's shelters.

"When you risk not having your kids with you — or knowing you don't have a place for them to sleep at night — it takes over your mind," Claudia Campos said. "You feel like, 'Oh my God, I'm useless.'"

In the 2016-17 school year, nearly 2,000 K-12 students in Marion and Polk counties were homeless, according to the Oregon Department of Education. That includes students living in shelters, sleeping in cars, paying for motels or crashing on a friend's couch.

That's up from 1,762 homeless students in 2014-15.

The Campos family came to Oregon from Los Angeles in 2016, when they moved in with Claudia's sister and her husband in Dallas. But Claudia's relatives eventually gave them a deadline to move out and find their own place.

The family had a Section 8 voucher for low-income housing. But the houses available were in more rural, remote locations that were hard to access, especially since they didn't have a car. Available homes in Salem were not covered by the voucher.

To make matters worse, Oscar had to have surgery to amputate a toe lost to diabetic ulcers. Neither he nor Claudia could find work.

Through its Safe Families for Children program, Catholic Community Services found a family willing to take in Jimmy and AJ while they finished the 2016-17 school year in Salem.

But Claudia and Oscar had to stay at the Salvation Army.

Claudia struggled with depression and anxiety, only seeing her children six or seven times over more than a month.

"I was crying almost every day. I just wanted to (be with them)," she said. "I just wanted to know, 'Are they okay?' 'Are they eating well?'"

The crisis came when the host family went on vacation and couldn't watch the boys anymore. And kids weren't old enough to join their parents at the Salvation Army.

Oscar assured AJ he wouldn't be sleeping on the streets alone. "I'm not (going) anywhere," he told his son. "I'm gonna stay with you."

But their luck changed that same day when Safe Families for Children called about an opening at the St. Joseph Shelter in Mt. Angel.

The shelter allows up to 12 families to live together. Each family has their own room in the dorm-like building, some with private restrooms.

Families cook their own food, are given job training and any other help they need, including counseling.

The Campos family quickly submitted an application. They interviewed the same day and were told they could begin sleeping there that night.

"I think that came from God," Oscar said.



Oscar, from left, Jimmy, Claudia and AJ Campos pose for a portrait on March 16. After becoming homeless in 2016, the Campos family worked through several living situations before landing at the St. Joseph Shelter in Mt. Angel.

MOLLY J. SMITH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

While the Campos family's homeless situation is one that hundreds of other local families face, their ability to get a room at the shelter is an exception.

"We were lucky," Claudia said. "There are some families with more difficulties."

Some families, she explained, don't "have good immigration status" or may need extensive medical attention. The shelter also doesn't take anyone with a criminal background or a history of substance abuse.

And families don't typically get a spot in the Mt. Angel shelter on the same day they interview.

There are currently 11 families staying at the shelter. The 12th slot is saved for emergency, last-minute situations. Families are expected to stay about six months, but that can vary by situation.

Oscar and Claudia said more shelters in the area should take entire families and expand their services.

"There are a lot of families out there going through the same thing; they're separated from their kids," Claudia said. "It's overwhelming and it's very difficult to ... leave them with someone else."

She said shelters also need to provide more resources to help them become self-sufficient.

At St. Joseph's, Claudia has been able to train for office work and learn how to apply for future positions. She's also learning how to save money and budget their expenses.

"Other shelters, they tell you about the resources, but they don't help you," Oscar said. At St. Joseph, "they tell you about the resources and they push you. 'They make you do something (for) yourself,'" he said. "They push you ... to do better."

Claudia and Oscar have tried to focus on the things that bring them and their children joy as they transition to more permanent housing.

Oscar loves to cook and Claudia likes to bake. AJ is a music enthusiast — he plays some piano, percussion for his high school band and the guitar, which he taught himself by watching YouTube videos.

Jimmy loves all things Lego. He likes to build a spaceship, take it apart and build it again in a new way. And while he said he isn't a master quite yet, he loves to play Minecraft.

"Sometimes people outside don't understand what it means to not have a home," Claudia said. "Even if we don't have a permanent house ... we try to do everything (we can) so the kids know we are here with them, that we're never gonna leave them."

Contact Natalie Pate at npate@statesmanjournal.com, 503-399-6745, or follow her on Twitter @NataliePate or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/nataliepatejournalist.

Swings

Continued from Page 1A

installed, similar to the one that once sat on the playground at Eugene Field School, where she attended kindergarten and first grade.

Now a fifth-grader at Victor Point School, Karis this year studied the letter-writing campaign of Sara Josepha Hale, who penned requests to five U.S. presidents for a national day of thanksgiving before Abraham Lincoln finally established Thanksgiving Day in 1863.

Karis enjoys reading, writing and poetry, so she decided to write her own letter. She sent a petition to Silverton Mayor Kyle Palmer, asking for wheelchair swings at Coolidge McClain Park. Although she believed her idea was a good one, she didn't have high hopes for action.

"I sort of thought it wouldn't happen because it took a long time for a letter to come back from the mayor," she said.

But behind the scenes, the mayor was putting his community connections to work. A longtime Rotary Club member, he'd just heard of a funding source that could help.

"Karis' letter to me was well timed, as I had just learned that our Rotary district had unused grant money and was opening another round of applications," Palmer said.

The organization's board approved the idea, and a deal was struck: the swings' cost would be split between Rotary's local and district entities. Also, city staff recommended adaptive swings to prevent kids from rolling out of or falling off wheelchair swings.

"The city considers (wheelchair swings) a liability when not used under supervision, (although) they are great for closed school playgrounds that have staff supervision during use," Palmer

said. "Additionally, they are quite a bit more expensive."

Adaptive swings ended up costing \$777 apiece, with local funds coming from Silverton's popular Daddy-Daughter Dance (which attracted 800 participants last month) and its Vine and Brew Festival, among other fundraisers.

Finally, Palmer could share the news. He wrote a letter to Karis, visited her in person and honored her at a school assembly.

Her activism encouraged him just as he's lobbying for more community leadership from youth. This year, he's brought the statewide "If I Were Mayor" contest to the school district, supported a youth advisory council proposal, and explored extending the high school's Interact Club to Silverton Middle School.

"This has been a great lesson in how kids can participate and make a difference in their community," he said.

Rotary President Cindy Jones also visited Karis' school to honor the fifth-grader, saying this is the first time in her 10 years with Rotary Club that she can recall a student animating a project.

"It's awesome, and I'm inspired by it," she said.

On a cold and drizzly March 31, more than 30 people gathered at the park, helping turn a good idea into a good deed.

The new Rotaract Club, for 18-30-year-olds, installed one swing, while members of the Rotary Club installed the other.

Once the ladder and tools were taken away, Karis acquiesced to calls that she try one of the swings she hopes will help many kids in the future. Grinning, she climbed aboard and mugged for the camera.

"I feel really proud, and I'm really excited," she said.



Karis Coleman attends the installation of new "adaptive" swings at Coolidge McClain Park in Silverton. The swings were added to the park after she wrote a letter to Silverton's mayor. CHRISTENA BROOKS/SPECIAL TO THE APPEAL TRIBUNE

CRUISE THROUGH YOUR WORK

T2080A2-42*

- 20 Gross HP¹, 2-Cylinder, V-Twin Gasoline Engine
- 42" Mower Deck • Cruise Control
- Hydrostatic Transmission

0% A.P.R. FINANCING FOR UP TO 84* MONTHS ON SELECT NEW KUBOTAS!

BX2380* WITH LA344 LOADER

- 23 Gross HP, 3-Cylinder Diesel Engine
- 4WD with Rear Differential Lock Standard
- Category I, 3-Point Hitch
- Performance-Matched Implements Available

Z421KW-54*

- 24 Gross HP¹ Gas Engine
- 54" Mower Deck
- Foldable ROPS
- Large Fuel Tank

OVS
We Sell Solutions

OVS MCMINNVILLE
2700 ST. JOSEPH RD.
MCMINNVILLE, OR
(503) 435-2700

OVS AURORA
19658 HWY. 99 E.
HUBBARD, OR
(971) 216-0111

www.ovs.com • 800-653-2216

STORE HOURS: Mon-Fri: 8-5 • Sat: 8-Noon

FULL SERVICE SHOPS AT BOTH LOCATIONS!

*20% Down, 0% A.P.R. financing for up to 84 months on purchases of select new Kubota BX, B, L, MX, MH(M7), RB, DMC, DM, RA and TE Series equipment from participating dealers' in-stock inventory is available to qualified purchasers through Kubota Credit Corporation, U.S.A.; subject to credit approval. Some exceptions apply. Example: 84 monthly payments of \$11.90 per \$1,000 financed. Offer expires 6/30/18. See us or go to KubotaUSA.com for more information. †For complete warranty, safety and product information, consult your local Kubota dealer and the product operator's manual. Power (HP/KW) and other specifications are based on various standards or recommended practices. K1042-04-140453-2

"Your friendly local dentist"

Brittney - RDH • Dr. Kim • Morgan - RDH

**New Patients
& Emergencies
Welcome**

■ Cosmetic
■ Implant
■ Bridges/Partials

■ Extractions
■ Crowns/Fillings
■ Root Canals

ENTER FOR OUR MONTHLY KINDLE DRAWING AT EACH APPOINTMENT

WE ACCEPT MOST INSURANCE

410 Oak St, Silverton, OR, 97381 kimsilvertonordentist.com
Call 503-873-3530 for an appointment.