

# Single mother raises 6-year-old through homelessness in Redmond

BY **BYRCE DOLE**  
CO Media Group

Single mother Kim Varner tries to build a life for her 6-year-old daughter every day. But raising her little bundle of energy in their fifth-wheel trailer while working and experiencing homelessness is grueling.

Varner frets over the holes in the trailer walls and a broken-down refrigerator that, for a short while, kept them from having nutritious food. She spends \$30 each week at the laundry mat, and cleans their dishes with water she boils over the stove. She maintains a propane heater that she knows will be important as temperatures drop this week, and she's on a two-year-long waitlist for subsidized housing.

"We're all one unforeseen circumstance away from this," she said Tuesday, motioning to her trailer while her child, Zoey Starnes, runs around playing with their kitten, Lizabell Diamond.

A tall, brown-haired, tattooed woman, Varner works long hours as a supervisor at Rite Aid in north Bend. She was once so close to having a stable life for Zoey, who attends Desert Sky Montessori, a nonprofit charter school in Bend.

For nine years, Varner rented a Bend home before moving to La Pine last October to live with Zoey's dad, who the single mom shares custody with. He kicked her out a month later, leaving Varner homeless. Now, she raises her daughter in a parked trailer in Redmond.

Varner lives on the verge, trying to make the most of raising her child through homelessness. She considers her living situation embarrassing and must contend with the circumstances, one that kept her 19-year-old son from staying with her on a recent visit, an experience she called "ripping your heart out hard."

"It's not like I'm not trying," Varner said. "There's just nowhere to go."

Varner was born in Tampa, Florida, and raised in Bend. She graduated from Mountain View High School, got married and bought a house on Cedarwood Road in Bend. Her husband was in the U.S. Air Force.

They rented out their home while living on U.S. Air Force bases in Texas and Alaska, their newborn son in tow.

They moved back to Bend



Zoey Starnes, 6, holds her kitten, Lizabell Diamond, with her mother, Kim Varner in the camp trailer where they live in Redmond.

Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

## faces of homelessness

in 2004, sold their home and bought a new one in La Pine. Varner struggled to hold a job while raising her son, who has Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism.

"I would constantly be getting called by the school to come and take care of him or come and get him or come and diffuse the situation," she said. "It became almost impossible to work."

Varner eventually got divorced, sold her home, moved to Redmond and, in 2007, the housing market crashed. She lost her job at a pumice plant in Chemult. Three months later, she met another man and got married.

"I literally jumped from one frying pan to another," Varner.

Varner bounced around Oregon before landing with her stepfather in Warrenton in 2008. But Varner couldn't catch a break: Her husband began experiencing kidney failure. The disease had reached an advanced stage. They moved back to Redmond so he could receive dialysis treatment. For about three years, Varner took care of her husband, watching him slip away. He died in March 2012.

"It was a hard one," she said.

Varner moved back to Bend. She received financial benefits from her husband's death that



Dean Guernsey/The Bulletin

Kim Varner lives in a camp trailer in Redmond.

helped her raise her son in the house on Whisper Ridge, where they'd remain for nine years. She met her ex-boyfriend and eventually became pregnant with Zoey.

It was quickly clear that Zoey would be a feisty child. One day, her cousin nudged Varner's pregnant belly. Zoey, apparently, wasn't happy.

"Zoey came uncorked," Varner said, laughing, remembering how her daughter kicked again and again. "That's who she is. She's a little fighter."

That fight would begin almost immediately upon Zoey's birth. At 6 months old, she contracted a disease that affected

her ears and made her deaf. To communicate, Varner and Zoey learned sign language. It escalated into an autoimmune disease and she struggled to breathe as her fever surged to 104 degrees. They took frequent trips to the hospital, where doctors prescribed hard steroids and, sometimes, didn't understand Zoey's condition. Varner was frustrated.

"It was horrible," she said.

Surgeries and care eventually helped Zoey conquer these ailments and regain her hearing. But she wouldn't say her first word — momma — until she was 2.

Since then, things have been

## How to help

For suggestions on how to help the region's residents experiencing homelessness, contact the Homeless Leadership Coalition by email at [info@cohomeless.org](mailto:info@cohomeless.org).

better for Zoey. She likes school. She rants about the beans she counts in math class and the art she loves to pin up on their trailer walls and show to visitors.

Varner meets with her daughter's teachers, helping them navigate Zoey's ongoing health problems.

## NEEDING COMPASSION

But Varner worries about her daughter's experience at school. She wonders if the kids and families judge her daughter for their life in the trailer, and whether she'll be invited to things like other students. She wants people to understand that the stigmas surrounding their experience aren't true, that being around them won't cause someone to catch some disease, and that her daughter is just like any other kid.

"We just need compassion," she said.

While her daughter goes to school, Varner manages the till at Rite Aid. She cleans up vomit in the bathroom. She helps

## Editor's Note

Who are the real people impacted by skyrocketing housing prices, decisions about homeless shelters or plans to sweep informal camps? The Spokesman wants to offer insight by telling their stories through the series Faces of Homelessness. Every two weeks this year, Bulletin and Spokesman reporters will introduce readers to a different homeless person. We are here to tell their stories.

blind customers find what they need. She manages the five employees below her, two of whom have also experienced homelessness. She cleans herself with baby wipes to look presentable, and she says she's fortunate to have a boss who doesn't mind if she shows up smelling poorly or with her hair undone.

What money she makes she uses to give her daughter a normal life. Their days begin at 7 a.m. Often, she prepares an oatmeal breakfast with fruit for Zoey. They cook, sleep, study and watch movies in the trailer Varner purchased in February.

After breakfast, Varner drives Zoey to school in Bend. She often jokes with Zoey about their life, saying "It's just an extended camping trip," or "It's normal for adults to have sleepovers." Zoey knows it's more than that.

But Varner knows she's not alone. She has taken note of the people who have lent her a hand. The social worker who brings her cases of bottled water. The volunteers who brought her a propane generator. The people from the Veterans of Foreign War Post who let her stay in their parking lot just because she comes from a family full of veterans and knock on her trailer door just to check in.

"Those are huge things," she said, adding that it makes her feel that she's "being treated like I exist, that I'm human."

Despite the situation, Zoey's toothy grin doesn't convey worry. She paints unicorns, watches the movie "Spirit" and plays with the pets. On Tuesday, while Varner was droning on about her daughter's health struggles, Zoey offered a rebuttal.

"But I know how to fight," she said. "No worries."

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# Downtown Redmond gets spooky for Halloween



Nick Rosenberger/Spokesman

Participants the Redmond Chamber of Commerce's Halloween trick-or-treating event on Oct. 31 in Downtown Redmond dressed as characters from Shrek while giving out candy.



Nick Rosenberger/Spokesman

Downtown Redmond filled with all kinds of spooky monsters and pop-culture costumes on Oct. 31 for Halloween trick-or-treating on 6th St. organized by the Redmond Chamber of Commerce.

## WORSHIP DIRECTORY

### Baptist

**Highland Baptist Church**  
3100 SW Highland Ave.,  
Redmond  
541-548-4161  
Lead Pastor: Lance Logue

Sunday Worship Services:  
Blended – 8 & 9:30 AM  
Contemporary – 11 AM  
(Worship Center)

hbc Español - 10:30 am  
(Youth Room)  
\*9:30 AM & 11 AM live-stream at:  
[www.hbcredmond.org](http://www.hbcredmond.org)

How can hbc pray for you?  
[prayer@hbcredmond.org](mailto:prayer@hbcredmond.org)

### Roman Catholic

**St Thomas Roman Catholic Church**  
1720 NW 19th Street  
Redmond, Oregon 97756  
541-923-3390

Father Todd Unger, Pastor  
Mass Schedule:  
Weekdays 8:00 am

Saturday Vigil 5:00 pm  
First Saturday 8:00 am (English)  
Sunday 8:00 am, 10:00 am  
(English)  
12:00 noon (Spanish)

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