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Shelter helps family unite under one roof

BY SARA B. HANSEN

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The Pieza family is thankful the emergency night shelter at Catholic Charities Larimer County provides them a place where they can all be together.

Michael, Stacey and their five children - Natalie, 8; Emily, 6; Abigail, 5; Patrick, 3, and Kaylee, 2 - used to call a Fort Collins apartment home. But a series of events pushed the family out.

A year ago, both Michael and Stacey were commuting to Greeley for their jobs. When they began having difficulty with child care, Michael quit to take care of the kids while Stacey continued working because her salary was higher.

After a few months, the stress of her job became too much, and the couple decided she should quit and Michael would find another job. But the recession hit and jobs were difficult, if not impossible, to find.

"I was frustrated," he said. "I thought I'd be able to find a job, but I couldn't."

He considered returning to the Western Slope to again work in the oil fields but didn't want to leave his family behind. After months of searching, he took up an offer from a friend in Chicago to seek a job there.

He thought the job hunt would be easier in a bigger city, but it wasn't. "There were just a lot more people doing the same thing."

While he was in Chicago searching for a job, Stacey and the children were evicted from the apartment and stayed with family members. Michael returned to Fort Collins in July and moved into the shelter. Stacey and the children stayed with his parents, but he was not welcome there.

In October, the stress of living apart became too much and the whole family moved into one of four family rooms at the shelter run by Catholic Charities, one of the agencies that benefit from the Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund.

"It was better to be whole as a family," Stacey said. "The kids are much happier. Before, when he'd leave at night, they'd just scream and cry."

Not only is the family back under one roof, but they are feeling much more optimistic about their future.

Michael was able to get a job as a certified nursing assistant at Columbine Health System through the Hand Up program. Stacey is attending night classes to become a cosmetologist at Hair Dynamics.

The Hand Up program is a partnership with area businesses that provides a prescreening process for potential employees who are homeless. One of the biggest barriers for the homeless is finding employment.

"A lot of people are out there looking for work and our clients have barriers. The homeless population has great potential and there's a lot they can do; they just need help to get back into it," said Whitney Reid, case manager at Catholic Charities Larimer County.

"(Reid) had faith in me," Michael said. "I didn't think I had any potential, but she saw right through that."

Michael is excited about working in the health field, one he had long considered but rejected because he didn't have the time or money to go to school. But the Hand Up program placed him in a program where he got on-the-job training.

Although he's not yet in his dream job, working at Columbine will help open doors.

"There's hope," Michael said. "In July, there was no hope."

The family is working with Reid to save money so they can eventually move out of the shelter and into their own home.

"We know it will take time to save for the down payment," Michael said. "But we want a place to call home."

Additional Facts

A chance to give to neighbors in need

Throughout the holiday season, the Coloradoan, Windsor Beacon, Loveland Connection and other regional media have joined together with the Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund to raise money for nine human service agencies in Larimer and Weld counties. Stories on the agencies appear each Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. Contributions will be partially matched by the El Pomar Foundation. Secure credit card contributions may be made at www.nocoemptystocking.org or by calling 211. Checks can be mailed to Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund, P.O. Box 466 Fort Collins, CO 80522.



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The Pieza family - clockwise from front, Abigail, 5; Emily, 6; mom, Stacey; Patrick, 3; dad, Michael; Natalie, 8; and Kaylee, 2 - said the shelter run by Catholic Charities Larimer County gives them hope. (V. Richard Haro/The Coloradoan)
