

Six kids, no job and one guardian angel

Homeless family gets hope, help from local ministry

By [Raymond Castile](#)

Tuesday, December 22, 2009 7:54 AM, CST

Don and Rachel Quesenberry thought they were driving to a better life three months ago when they loaded their six children into a car and headed for the West Coast.

Now their bustling family is jobless and homeless, scrunched into a two-bed motel room at the Budget Inn in Wentzville.

"I know it looks bad," said Don Quesenberry, 37. "We're not bad people. We just had a run of bad luck."



[Raymond Castile](#) photo -- Don Quesenberry, 37, helps daughter Karmia, 4, fill in a puzzle while daughter Joannah, 14, studies on the bed of their motel room in Wentzville.

Rachel Quesenberry, 34, is pregnant with her seventh child - her first son among six daughters.

"You should have heard the crying when they found out he was a boy," Rachel said. "They said, mommy, babies are supposed to be girls."

Rachel home schools the girls, ages 2-14. The younger ones run circles around the motel room and use the beds as trampolines. The older ones sit studiously at a small table, burying their noses in textbooks.

When they talk, the girls touch their index fingers to their cheeks and look skyward, as if composing poetry. They speak with Victorian manners, using words like "rather" and "quite."

Rachel said she has been a housewife and stay-at-home mom for most of their 16 years of marriage. Don managed a retail store in their former home of Great Bend, Kan., where they lived paycheck-to-paycheck in a three-bedroom house.

In September he took another retail management job in Greeley, Colo. It promised higher pay and the opportunity to live in a better neighborhood. Don had two weeks before he was to report for work Oct. 1.

The family had never taken a vacation, so they decided to spend the time driving to Oregon to see the West Coast.

"The whole trip was supposed to take two days there and two days back," Don said. "It was not supposed to be the disaster that it was."

The car started overheating in Medford, Ore., Rachel said. They would pull off the road and wait for it to cool down, but as soon as they resumed driving, it would overheat again. As they drove up a mountain road, they heard a grinding sound. The transmission went out.

The family made it to Klamath Falls, Ore., where they holed up in a Motel 6 while a mechanic worked on the transmission. Don called his new employer and explained the situation. They granted him an extension, pushing his start date to Oct. 4.

The repair bill totaled \$2,280, more money than the family possessed.

"We were doomed," Don said.

The owner of an AAMCO gave them a price break, allowing them to resume their journey. But it was too late for the family to make it to Kansas by Oct. 4.

"They said they needed to fill the position and could not wait anymore," Don said.

"These jobs are leadership positions," Rachel said. "If you can't get it together, they don't want you."

"The bottom line is, the fault is ours," Don said. "We shouldn't have taken a vacation at that time."

Rather than returning to Great Bend, the family pushed forward to Fort Collins, Colo., a populous college town that seemed ripe with opportunities.

"We thought surely we'd get a job in Fort Collins," Rachel said. "But once we got there, people said no, the jobs are terrible there. We tried to make a go of it, but we couldn't find any work."

The family contacted a homeless shelter, but it did not have space for eight people. Instead, the shelter paid for two nights in a motel. Through a church, the Quesenberrys met an elderly couple who let them stay three weeks in their house.

"When nobody else would care or help, they were the nicest people," Don said. "They had nothing to give us but their house, and they gave us that. It was deeply moving."

"We were pretty rock bottom at that point," Rachel said.

Hunting for jobs online, Don found some openings in the St. Louis area. His mother and sister lived in Warrenton, so it seemed like a smart idea to pile in the car and head for Missouri.

The family spent two weeks living with Don's mother and sister in a rented three-bedroom

mobile home. But tensions started building. Don said his mother's landlord did not want eight extra people living in a small trailer. They had to leave, but they had nowhere left to go.

The Quesenberrys sought help from the North East Community Action Corporation (NECAC), a nonprofit social service organization. NECAC gave them a list of phone numbers, but highlighted and drew a star next to one name - Paul Kruse.

Kruse, of Lake Saint Louis, runs the First Step Back Home ministry. Kruse helps homeless people find jobs and shelter, paying for them to stay in motels. Kruse said he worked with 350 "heads of households" and 600 individuals in 2008.

Kruse moved the Quesenberrys into the Budget Inn on Dec. 7, paying their \$230 weekly rent. He said the Quesenberrys' case is one of the most unusual he has seen since starting his homeless ministry nearly five years ago.

"It is just unbelievable," Kruse said. "Six kids out in the cold. I just can't handle that. I'll keep helping them until they have a job."

Rachel said she did not know what her family would have done if not for Kruse.

"He didn't give us the third degree," she said. "He actually paid money to help somebody."

"He said he didn't care how big our family was, he didn't want us to be cold outside," Don said. "People like Paul who actually care, you don't find people like that. 'Thank you' doesn't quite cover it with Paul."

Don said he has had 15 job interviews since coming to the St. Louis area. He said at least one company seemed interested in hiring him for a retail management job. Don said he has a strong resume and he was confident he would find a job by mid-January.

In the meantime, the family remains in "survival mode," Rachel said. They are living on food stamps, borrowing money to put gas in the car.

"I'm so tired of seeing that light come on, telling us there's no gas," Rachel said.

For Christmas, Don and Rachel said they are telling their kids, "Don't get your hopes up."

"Two girls had birthdays since this happened and we didn't get them anything," Don said. "So we're already two birthdays behind."

Don said he is not a victim and is not looking for sympathy.

"This whole thing is my fault," he said. "I made a decision to try to better our lives and I failed miserably. Every decision I've made seems to go in the wrong direction. It was not a very sinful thing to want to go to the ocean."

The Quesenberrys said they do not want people sending them donations or gifts. If readers are moved to want to help, the family asked that they donate directly to Paul Kruse's ministry.

Kruse said he accepts donations at:

Paul Kruse, First Step Back Home, 18 Auvergne Drive, Lake Saint Louis, MO 63367.