

Ladonna and Richard sometimes skip meals

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St. Francois County



With a satisfying slam of the screen door, seven-year-old Kayden runs through the door of his parents' home.

The school bus had just dropped him off at the mobile home park just outside Farmington, Mo.

Once in the door, Kayden shrugs out of his coat and tosses it and his backpack onto the couch.

Next stop is the kitchen, where he quickly scans the counter for an after-school snack.

"We're about to have dinner," his mother, Ladonna, warns while shooing him out of the kitchen.

It's an exchange heard in countless homes across the country. But in this home, Kayden's parents aren't just worried that he may spoil his dinner.

In this house, Kayden's parents don't have enough food to provide the extras like after-school snacks. Sometimes, by the end of the month, they don't even have enough food for regular meals.

Ladonna and her husband, Richard, sometimes even skip meals so that there will be enough for Kayden to eat.

"Rick and I both have gone without or we take the lesser value so we can make sure the child eats," Ladonna says.

Unlike many kids, Kayden loves broccoli, cauliflower and asparagus. Maybe it's because he doesn't get them often, or maybe it's because his parents have taught him the importance of eating healthy foods.

"When we go through the grocery store it's sad because he loves broccoli



and cauliflower but we have to walk by it because we can't get that," Ladonna says.

"The stuff that's good for you, well, there's no way to afford that," Richard adds. "You consume food that your own doctor says isn't good for you."

Every month, the family nets \$888 in income from disability and food stamps. But just rent, utilities and car insurance add up to \$800. That doesn't include medicine copays, food or any repairs.

"Food seems to go up by a nickel or dime every week," Richard says. "Those nickels and dimes add up."

Rick and Ladonna budget for a month at a time, and try to plan their meals for the month. But if anything unexpected happens, they have nothing left to give.

"If you have a medical or vehicle emergency you're this close to being gone," Rick says. "If the washer or dryer were to go out, just the cost of the laundromat would mean no food or medicine."

Ladonna, 51, takes 14 different medicines and Rick takes eight different ones.

"Sometimes it's either go without medication or go without food," Rick says. "Sometimes we break it in half so we can buy clothes for Kayden."

Every year kids go through two stages of growth, so they need new winter and summer clothes every year, Rick says. The family relies on the Farmington Ministerial Alliance food pantry to help put food on the table.

"If it wasn't for the food pantries I don't know what we'd do," Rick says.

Rick, 51, says he sees people in the pantry line now that he never expected to see. People who once had good-paying jobs - people who would have been too ashamed to ask for help - but now have no choice.

After a pantry day, Kayden is always delighted to see a stocked kitchen.

"He'll come in and see a banana or whatever on the counter and he'll say, 'you got food!'" Ladonna says. "He gets excited when he sees snacks because he knows our budget doesn't allow that."

Rick is a Navy veteran. He served as a communications specialist at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor for four years. He worked as an advertising salesman for Southwestern Bell Yellow Pages, and later worked various labor jobs. In the 1980s, he started his own tree trimming and landscape business.

Ultimately, Rick's back couldn't take the hard labor any longer. By 2005, he had a myriad of severe back issues, including a collapsed disc. He saw several specialists and went through various therapies before the doctors told him his only option was surgery.

As a self-employed businessman, Rick didn't have health insurance. In order for him to have the surgery he needed, he had to apply for disability so that Medicaid would cover his medical expenses.

It took years for the family to get approval for Rick to have the surgery he needed. In the meantime, he was unable to work.

"When you have your own business you can't take off work to go to the doctor," Rick says.



The West family relies on the Farmington Ministerial Alliance, a partner agency of the St. Louis Area Foodbank. Without the food they receive from the pantry, the family would not get enough to eat. In these pictures, volunteers and Foodbank staff hand out thousands of pounds of food to families in need at food fairs in Farmington.

"We had to sell everything we owned."

He had surgery in 2009.

When Rick and Ladonna first got married, they lived in a tiny three-bedroom apartment with their four children. They later bought their mobile home outside Farmington.

Ladonna, a St. Francois County native, worked most of her life. For many years she was a single mom, working full-time and taking care of her two daughters.

In 2006, Rick and Ladonna got a bittersweet surprise. Ladonna's oldest daughter, Christina, was pregnant.

Unfortunately, this news came out only as Ladonna discovered her daughter was terribly ill.

Christina had contracted bronchitis from cleaning her cat's litter box. The bacteria in her lungs led to endocarditis and congestive heart failure. The severity of her illness caused doctors to put her in a medically-induced coma.

Even though Christina was just 28 weeks pregnant, doctors told Ladonna that they needed to take the baby so they could treat Christina's illness.

They did not expect the baby to survive. Doctors delivered Kayden via caesarean section on Sept. 5, 2006.

Three days later, Christina died of her complications from her illness. She was 23.

She never got the chance to hold her son.

As Ladonna and Rick were forced to deal with their grief over the loss of Christina, they also took custody of her baby. He weighed just two pounds and was 10 inches long.

"When we brought him home, they gave us a list of things that were probably going to be wrong with him," Ladonna says.

Doctors predicted Kayden may be blind, mentally retarded and suffer severe physical complications. He required constant care, and was hooked up to complicated breathing and heart monitors.

Ladonna had been working at both a restaurant and at a grocery store. She had to quit both to take care of Kayden. Rick did his best to help, despite his severe back injuries.

"God gave him to me and I'm expected to raise him and raise him correctly," Ladonna says.

Just as they were bringing Kayden home from the hospital, the disability payments began coming in. They considered it a blessing.

As they were still reeling from the loss of Christina, Ladonna and Rick suffered another blow.

Rick's daughter, Natasha, was killed in a motorcycle accident in November 2011. She was just 21.

Perhaps it is the loss of both Christina and Natasha that makes Rick and Ladonna so protective of Kayden.

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we have to weigh whether or not we**

can do it,” Rick says. “The food pantry helps us tremendously when we're in those crisis weeks.”

From years of manual labor, Ladonna is now too suffering from severe back problems. Osteoporosis has left her bones so fragile that doctors say she cannot withstand the surgery she needs.

Despite their medical issues, both Rick and Ladonna want to return to the workforce.

“It took me a long time to learn how to walk again,” Rick says. “Nobody wants to hire you. I’m a liability for insurance.”

Ladonna completed her associate’s degree in drug and alcohol abuse counseling. She completed an internship and has been looking for work ever since.

“There’s no jobs in Farmington except for fast food,” Richard says. “And at those, they’ll hire the 18-year-old for less money instead of someone 35 and older.”

As Ladonna looks for work, the family looks for ways to help themselves and others.

“We put out a garden and we share with everybody,” Rick says. “We get a lot of food out of the woods.”

Rick is teaching Kayden to hunt for quail, turkey and deer and how to forage for mushrooms and berries.

Kayden is now in second grade and is doing great. He has none of the physical or mental complications the doctor’s once predicted.

Kayden only has a vague understanding on the economic status of his household. He’s too young to understand complicated issues like income and expenses.

But he knows they don’t always have enough. When snacks get low, he asks when they’ll get money next.

“We don’t get to take him places,” Rick says. “He’s stuck here with two old people.”

Rick and Ladonna sacrifice what they can for themselves just to make sure Kayden gets what he needs. They’ve never bought anything for each other for Christmas or birthdays.

“If we need a specialist in St. Louis, we have to weigh whether or not we can do it,” Rick says. “The food pantry helps us tremendously when we’re in those crisis weeks.”

Rick and Ladonna don’t go to the food pantry every month. They only go when they really need it.

“There are people worse off than us,” Rick says. “Everybody is 30 days way from total desolation.”

The West family shared their story in April 2014 with Bethany Prange. Some of their personal circumstances may have changed since that time.

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