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“We’re all just one or two major crises away from needing help.”

Ken and Krista know this, because they have gone through it themselves.

Ken and Krista Voegeli have heard it all.

They’ve heard from folks who can’t understand why everyone can’t pull themselves out of poverty just by working harder.

They’ve seen the Facebook rants, proclaiming that everyone in line at the food pantry is unemployed and lazy.

They’ve witnessed the disapproving stares from neighbors who judge anyone who comes to pick up food in a decent car.

And to all those they encounter who think like this, Ken and Krista have the same message: we’re all just one or two major crises away from needing help. Ken and Krista know this, because they’ve gone through it themselves.

In early December 2008, Ken was severely injured when scaffolding collapsed at the construction job where he worked. The fall shattered his tibia and fibula.

Ken, 52, had always been able to provide for his family. He enlisted in the Air Force in 1981, and served 10 years, 10 months and 10 days.

He worked as an audio visual technician at Air Force bases in Washington D.C., and Hawaii before taking his final assignment at Scott Air Force Base.

When he got out of the service in 1992, he started working two jobs – days in

Clinton County



On Halloween 2012, the St. Louis Area Foodbank and volunteers from Matthew 25 Ecumenical Food Pantry handed out almost 30,000 pounds of fresh produce and canned goods to families in need

construction and nights as a bartender.

Through his night job, he met Krista. They married July 28, 2001.

After their marriage, Ken moved in with Krista in her hometown of Carlyle. Ken continued to work construction for several different companies.

“I’ve built houses in every town between here and Waterloo,” Ken says. “I worked seven days a week, 12 to 14 hours a day.”

When he finished the day at a job site, he’d go on to work a variety of side jobs in construction. This extra income kept the family financially secure for a decade.

Ken worked construction for so long – 18 years – that he planned to start his own construction business. By 2008, he had financing approved and jobs lined up for his new company. Ken’s payoff from a major side job would have provided the start-up money.

Then in December, the scaffolding collapsed. In that one instant, all his plans for his own business evaporated.

“I had to give the jobs away,” Ken says.

Ken wasn’t able to walk, and underwent multiple surgeries to fix his leg. He wasn’t able to finish the side job that would have provided the money for his business. The little savings he and Krista had squirreled away had to be used to pay every day bills.

Ken and Krista had to buy a vehicle to travel back and forth between their home in Carlyle and St. Louis University Hospital where Ken underwent treatment, therapy and surgeries.

Before the accident, Ken, Krista and their children lived in a trailer in Carlyle. After the fall, Ken could no longer get in and out, so the whole family had to move in with Krista’s parents.

Ken, Krista and their two youngest daughters – Carley, now 16, and Kaleigh, now 8 – moved into the three-bedroom home occupied by her parents and her grandmother.

“They’ve helped us out a lot,” Ken says of his in-laws.

Krista’s dad suffers from multiple sclerosis and her grandmother is in the final stages of Alzheimer’s. Despite the inconveniences of the cramped quarters, the family works together to take care of one another.

Krista took a job at a restaurant in Carlyle, hoping to keep the family above water. Unfortunately, it was not enough to make ends meet.

in Carlyle, Illinois.



Ken and Krista Voegeli volunteer at Matthew 25, where they are also clients. Matthew 25 is the only St. Louis Area Foodbank partner agency in Clinton County. David Huene (pictured) is the pantry director.

Ken, meanwhile, managed to get around with the help of crutches. He quickly tired of recuperating on the couch, so he decided to help out where he could.

In the fall of 2009, Ken began volunteering at the Matthew 25 Food Pantry in Carlyle, a partner agency of the St. Louis Area Foodbank. A few months later, Krista joined him in the volunteer work there.

“I started volunteering because of all the help that I was getting from friends, neighbors and the church,” Ken says. “This was one way I wanted to give back.”

While volunteering, Ken and Krista discovered they were eligible to receive food from the pantry. Until then, the family had been buying a few groceries whenever they could, barely able to afford enough for everyone to eat.

“We were buying a lot of Ramen noodles,” Krista says.

The pantry’s help meant the Voegeli’s could provide meat, canned vegetables and bread to their children.

“We were totally meatless before and there were no fresh fruits or vegetables,” Ken says. “I was buying three cans of green beans on sale and that was it.”

Even with the pantry’s help, from 2009 to 2011, the family struggled just to provide the day-to-day necessities. Ken and Krista did their best to make holidays special, but Christmases in those years were meager.

“The kids were extremely understanding,” Ken says. “They knew we were struggling and they’ve been really patient. We try to do whatever we can for the kids.”

Thankfully, by late 2012, Ken was approved for disability and received back payments. The boost wouldn’t lift the family entirely out of poverty, but Ken and Krista were grateful to be able to provide their children with a good Christmas for the first time in three years.

They also caught up Krista’s parents on their utility bills and paid their house payment.

Ken and Krista are the first to admit they never thought they’d need food from a pantry.

“I know it’s not how we’d like to be, but sometimes you just have to get by,” Krista says.

They’re quick to note that their volunteer work at the food pantry has been eye-opening.

“You realize just how much people need this,” Ken says. “There was this family in Beckemeyer with four kids and the wife was six months pregnant. The husband lost his job and they were living in a shed with a dirt floor. They couldn’t afford gas to get here so we took food to them.”

Even Ken and Krista’s children have come to understand the importance of simple kindness.

Carley volunteers at Matthew 25 Food Pantry every summer. Since Kaleigh is too young to hand out food, she helps out at the pantry by drawing pictures for the families who come in for food. This simple gesture is often met with tears of gratitude.

In Clinton County, the numbers of those in need continues to grow. When Ken started volunteering at the pantry in 2009, they served 130 families a month. Last December, they provided food to 273 families.

Ken and Krista are constantly amazed by the generosity of their community.

When USDA food donations declined in late 2012, Matthew 25 food pantry sent out an appeal to the community, asking for donations to keep the doors open. The community responded with an enormous outpouring of support that allowed the pantry to continue to feed the hungry.

“We’ve got some really good people in this community,” Ken says.

Ken and Krista hope one day soon to not need the food from the pantry. But even then, they plan to keep volunteering at Matthew 25. Their experience has taught them how important it is to help others.

“We’ve made a lot of sacrifices,” Ken says. “We appreciate what we have so much more.”

The Voegeli family shared their story in mid-February 2013 with Bethany Prange, communications coordinator at the St. Louis Area Foodbank. Their personal circumstances may have changed since the original interview.

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