For one Maine family, the long, hard road from ‘nowhere’ to home

By Erin Clark and Zoe Greenberg Globe Correspondent and Globe Staff, December 21, 2019, 5:54 p.m.

Patrick Lupien and Mariah LeMieux-Lupien knew they were going to be evicted, because they hadn’t paid rent on their apartment in Biddeford, Maine, for two months. The lapse was a matter of basic math: As Mariah put it, when you don’t have it, you don’t have it.
They had four special-needs children, so it was important to stick to routine as much as possible. Patrick, who had a full-time IT job that paid about $40,000 a year, kept going to work. Every morning, Mariah set out the same cereal bowls and 4-year-old Laya’s favorite pink spoon.

“Here we are, packing again, only a campground to go to on Saturday, for a week,” Mariah wrote on Facebook in July. “We don’t know where we’ll be after that.”

And then the Lupien family became part of an often invisible group known as the “working homeless,” people with jobs who aren’t making enough to cover the high cost of rent.

The family’s experience over the next six months — sleeping at multiple campgrounds and in a dozen churches before finding another apartment to rent — offers a window into the insecurity and panic that come with raising children on the brink of financial
insolvency, never sure if the money coming in will cover the bills today or the rent tomorrow.

“That’s where my husband and I have always been,” Mariah said. “Doing good enough, and being like, ‘Yay, we’re finally getting somewhere,’ and then all of a sudden . . .”

All of a sudden, falling.

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ONE

Evicted

Laya (left) and Evan pushed a tote up the ramp of the U-Haul while their parents, Mariah LeMieux-Lupien and Patrick Lupien, watched from the porch of their apartment. “More, more, more!” yelled Laya, after stacking the tote in the back of the truck.
The Lupien children tend to shout and tumble and race through most spaces. Evan, 8, with his shoulder-length golden hair, can often be found chattering at length in a tutu and monster slippers. Dylan, 6, has blue eyes and does not speak because of his autism, but sometimes he plays the piano. Laya is the youngest; she bounds behind her older siblings and is something of a daredevil, climbing rocks with Patrick when they go to the beach.

As eviction approached, Mariah spent hours researching where her family might live, detailing her findings in a pink and purple spiral-bound notebook.

She and Patrick chose to let the Globe into their lives over the past six months, sharing even difficult details, in the hope that their story might offer hope to struggling families and inform others about what homelessness really looks like.

Mariah organized paperwork while Evan (center) and Dylan played on the couch. “It was really hard going through all the school work from the kids,” Mariah reminisced. “How happy and hard they’ve all worked. They’re kicking ass while I’m barely hanging
Both age 40 and married for 10 years, they grew up in rural Aroostook County in northern Maine. The County, as they both refer to it, was full of demons for Mariah; she said she had experienced both sexual and physical violence there. Patrick, a shy and even-tempered man, wasn’t able to find a job that paid much more than minimum wage, even with his associate’s degree in computer electronics, and there were meager educational resources for their children.

The kids needed much more. Sam, 17, is autistic and now lives in a residential program paid for by MaineCare, the state’s Medicaid program. Dylan is also autistic; Evan has serious ADHD and a cognitive delay, and Laya has a speech delay.

So the family decided to move to Biddeford, where Patrick got a job at nearby New England Communications, making $20 an hour, and where there were more options for the children. Mariah set about arranging schooling and therapy for them.

Their income fell far short of what it costs for a family their size to get by in Biddeford — $61,000 according to an MIT living wage calculator.

“It was definitely still paycheck to paycheck, the occasional food box situation, that kind of stuff, but we could do it,” Mariah said.

The family’s case manager in Maine, whose services were covered by MaineCare, spoke with the Globe but asked not to be named because she was not authorized by her employer to speak on the record. She described Mariah and Patrick as “very loving parents, very attentive,” even as their mental health conditions sometimes affected their parenting.
Patrick shared that he has suffered from major depression and Mariah described her
dissociative disorder, which is often the result of trauma; it makes it difficult for her to
work a regular job. During an episode, Mariah experiences a kind of blackout and can’t
remember where she is or what she’s doing. She compares it to when the avatar in a
video game starts “glitching and ends up running into a wall and is stuck.”

Even so, in Biddeford, the family was getting by.

Then in March, the Lupiens had their food stamps cut from $670 to $187 a month. The
Maine Department of Health and Human Services told the Globe, with the Lupiens’
permission, that the family had “changes to income and expenses” that resulted in the
cut. The department also said that it discovered that one person was no longer living at
home. That was likely Sam, who had been in a residential program for nearly a year when
the benefits were cut. The family said their income hadn’t changed.

Suddenly, with little warning, the family couldn’t cover their rent. Beginning to panic,
they called extended stay motels and shelters across the state.

“The questions...am I poor enough to get help? Will they think I'm lying anyway?
Homeless with kids should...”
Mariah closed her eyes after packing a tote in her bedroom while her son Dylan, who has non-verbal autism, sat quietly at her side. The family of five was forced out of their home in Biddeford, Maine. With nowhere else to go, they reserved a spot in a campground for the foreseeable future.  

“There was just nowhere,” Patrick said.

So on a brutally hot day in July, they packed a U-Haul with the piano given to them by an acquaintance, most of the kids’ clothes, the papier-maché hammerhead shark Evan had made in school, and drove it all to a storage unit.

Mariah worried about keeping Dylan, who often bolts, safe in a wide-open campground. Evan was old enough to remember when they had been homeless for a spell the year before; little Laya was often anxious, and got on all fours and meowed like a kitten when she was overwhelmed. How would living out of a van affect them?

Still, Mariah tried to keep the mood light.

“Hey, we’re gonna go camping!” she told her kids, as they helped lug boxes into the truck.
Laya (left) and Evan took a bath while their parents prepared for the move out of their three-bedroom apartment in Biddeford, Maine. Two years ago, the family moved from Northern Maine to seek out better opportunities. Evan, who has severe ADHD and a cognitive delay, was not receiving the one-on-one attention that he needed. Often, he would be placed by himself in a resource room because the school did not know what to do with him. ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE
Mariah set up her family’s tent in the waning moonlight next to beachgoers and vacationing families at Shamrock Campground in Biddeford, Maine. The Lupien family would be making the tent their home. ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

In mid-July, the Shamrock Campground was lush with greenery and crowded with families. Some were there just to relax, and some, like the Lupiens, were there to live. The family set up a tent in a quiet spot surrounded by trees, close to a murky pond with a chorus of insistent bullfrogs.

Patrick had sometimes lived with his parents at campsites when he was growing up and they had nowhere else to go. But camping presented special problems for the Lupien children. Dylan needed to be in an enclosed space so that he couldn’t run away; a tent was too flimsy. So Patrick and Mariah tucked the children into the back of their Toyota Sienna minivan each night, in a nest of blankets and pillows, cracking the windows and zip-tying the doors shut from the outside to keep them safe.
Evan, Dylan, and Laya watched a movie while getting ready for bed in the back of their family’s van at the campground. Because of the children’s special needs and Dylan’s flight risk due to his autism, the children slept in the van with the doors zip-tied closed. ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

In the mornings, a school bus would ferry the kids to their summer programs. Patrick got ready for work in the public bathhouse. Then he would drive to the office and Mariah would sit in the van in the office parking lot, making calls.

“I’ve called every shelter, community service programs, and local city programs,” Mariah wrote on Facebook, which became a kind of diary. “Door after door being slammed in my face.”
The family ate dinners cooked on a two-burner camp stove on the picnic table near their tent, surviving mostly on hot dogs and grilled cheese sandwiches.

By late July, the family’s case manager warned Mariah and Patrick that she was required to contact the Maine Department of Health and Human Services because Dylan could potentially get hurt if he ran from the van. It was also nearing fall and getting colder.

The state assigned the Lupien case to an Alternative Response Program which deals with reports of abuse or neglect that are determined to be “low to moderate” risk, and sent a representative to the campground to check in.

“We're never gonna find a place to live. We're not “worthy”.”
Patrick sat with his son Evan at their campsite. Surrounded by a pond and dense forest, the parents had to be abundantly cautious to ensure the children did not wander off. ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

“The advice given . . . get into a shelter or get into an apartment . . . or the kids will be taken away,” Mariah wrote about the visit in late July. She tried not to despair.

“My [outer] shell is very good at appearing like I’m fine. I’m not,” Mariah confessed on Facebook.

“Dylan hugs me, whispers in my ear ‘ah wuv ooo,’ ” she wrote. “All I feel is that I have failed him and Evan and Laya.”
Sam Lupien, Mariah's oldest son, rested his head in his mom's lap while his half-siblings Evan and Laya curled up next to him. Sam lives in a group home for challenged teens and occasionally visits his family on the weekends. Sam has high-functioning autism, and in the spring, he will graduate. The 17-year-old has plans of starting a food truck and selling wood-fired pizza. ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Evan ate cereal at the campground in the early hours of the morning.

Patrick Lupien and his son Evan brushed their teeth while they got ready for the day in the campground bathroom.
Mariah picked up Dylan and held him close to her face while spending one night at a hotel provided by their case manager in Portland. The following day, they would be moving to a homeless shelter in New Hampshire. After spending over a month living in a tent and their van, the family’s best option was moving to the shelter, allowing them to stay together, which was truly the only thing Mariah and Patrick wanted. ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

In the middle of August, the family grasped a lifeline. They were finally offered a spot at the Seacoast Family Promise shelter, an intensive program for homeless families an hour away in Exeter, N.H. Patrick would need to leave his job in Portland to make the move.
They were once again faced with a stark set of choices: remain outside, where the weather was getting colder and their children might be taken away, or move to a new state, without a job or a clear sense of the future.

They decided to take the chance.

“\textbf{I thought they were a very good family. Very intelligent, good parents,}” said Pati Frew-Waters, the executive director of the shelter. She had seen hundreds of families in similar positions, with few resources, crushing expenses, and skyrocketing anxiety from living homeless. The Seacoast program offers families a place to stay for up to six months and requires that they save 70 to 90 percent of their income.
Each week, the family shuttled to a new church with some belongings. Patrick began applying for a job; the program gave him a gas card and a suit for job interviews.

“There was a little bit of relief because we knew that we had a safe place to stay,” Patrick said. The program also provided dinner each night.

Still, it was difficult to live within the strict rules and requirements of the program, Mariah said. They had been struggling on their own, but at least they had been in charge.
After arriving to the New Hampshire homeless shelter with an uncertain future, Patrick talked with Mariah while Laya ate dinner at the church. Every Sunday, the family rotated to a new church where they spent a week. ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

“When you have people who come to live in shelter, they’ve come to that place where they have no control left over their lives. That’s an awful thing to give up,” Frew-Waters said.

Then the horizon brightened. Patrick got a job as a field engineer at Granite State Communications. His salary was $80,000, double what he was making in Maine. He and Mariah celebrated with a high five.
Now that Patrick had a well-paying job, they turned to the next hurdle: finding an affordable apartment that could comfortably fit five or six people.

At the end of November, Mariah posted about yet another move — but this time, it was good news.

“Today is our last day with Seacoast Family Promise, tonight our last night of being homeless,” she wrote. “It feels scary, odd, unreal, and totally amazing all at the same time.”
Exhausted, Patrick leaned against the bedroom door at the shelter while Laya (left) and Evan jumped back and forth on the bed. Often sharing one large room, the family of five was in much need of their own space.  

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Laya and her mother played on one of their last nights at Seacoast Family Promise.

Patrick hugged Mariah goodbye before leaving for work at his new job. "I know that for him having a job where he's getting paid what he's worth, he feels valued, he feels respected, and he's proud," said Mariah.
Evan rode his scooter down the ramp of the moving truck while friends and family helped the Lupiens move into their new apartment in New Hampshire. The family had been homeless since July, with most of the children’s toys in storage, and Evan was excited to be reunited with his scooter. ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

At 6 a.m. on a recent Friday morning, Mariah set out breakfast in the three-bedroom apartment the family is now renting; she lined up the colorful bowls for the kids, the reassuring pink spoon. A plastic Christmas tree full of ornaments stretched to the ceiling nearby.

One by one, the children blinked into the light of the kitchen.
Evan ate his Golden Grahams while skimming his favorite book, “Who Would Win? Whale vs. Giant Squid.” Laya floated around in her Frozen-themed snow boots, bought at Walmart with a voucher Mariah got through the shelter program. Dylan wandered into the kitchen humming a “Moana” song.

The family had been living in the apartment for about three weeks. The floors were carpeted and the kids had bunk beds. Mariah and Patrick were trying to get used to the larger paychecks, the locks on the doors, the feeling that their family might be safe for a while. Sometimes, when they are in the van for too long, Evan thinks they’re moving again.

“It’s still very twilight. It still doesn’t feel real,” Mariah said.
She now keeps a binder of precise weekly budgets. She puts the money for each expense into paper envelopes, a trick she learned at the Seacoast program.

A little after 7 a.m., Dylan and Evan boarded the school bus. Mariah handed Patrick his lunchbox and Laya brought him his coat.

“Bye,” she whispered to her father.

“I love you, sweetheart,” Mariah said at the door.
Laya Lupien pretends to mop the floor of the new apartment with her mother, Mariah LeMieux-Lupien.

Dylan Lupien wrapped his mom, Mariah, in a tight hug on their first morning at their new apartment.
“Frosty the Snowman” played in the background while the Lupien family set up their Christmas tree in the living room of their new home. With boxes still left to unpack, they were slowly settling into their new apartment in New Hampshire. After four moves in five months, they have finally found home. ERIN CLARK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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