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Homeless students: 'We have everything we need'

Family living in camper has shelter, food, despite not having a permanent address



Mariah Mattox sits near a space heater before finishing getting ready for school, in the family's camper home at Enchanted Shores campground in Peotone, Ill. Mariah and her parents, Kim and Rich, have lived at the campground since early July. (Tribune photo David Pierini / October 19, 2009)

By Bonnie Miller Rubin Tribune reporter

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Six-year-old Mariah Mattox lives in a camper and is one of about 1,000 students in Will County who meet the state's definition of having no permanent address.

Each morning before school, Kim and Rich Mattox make sure their first-grader's clothes are clean, teeth are brushed and hair is combed before the bus rolls through the Enchanted Shores campgrounds in Peotone.

"We don't feel like we're homeless at all," said Kim Mattox, 48, who juggles a full-time job, an online college class and parenting -- all in a space barely larger than an office cubicle.

"We have a roof over our heads and food on the table. ... We have everything we need."

Mariah is the only child at Enchanted Shores. She's certainly not the only student whose family lives in a camper.

One Web site even promotes RVs as a hedge against dire straits, without a trace of irony that a once-proud emblem of American prosperity and leisure has been transformed into last-gasp housing.

During their 11-year marriage, the Mattoxes have eked out a pinched livelihood.

Kim Mattox has a downtown job entering data on the night shift. Her husband is mentally disabled but picks up yardwork and other unskilled labor whenever available. Saving on housing costs keeps their heads above water, she said.

Not that rent is cheap. The Mattoxes pay \$575 a month, utilities included, to park their borrowed rig.

Despite the cramped quarters, the lifestyle is healthier than a shelter, she said. In the summer, Mariah played in a mesh tent, ate dinner over a campfire and caught fireflies. She loves her teacher, drawing pictures and having friends.

With winter looming, though, the family will have to spend more time indoors.

"Whatever happens, we're going to be fine," Mattox said. "Things will work out the way God wants."