Juan Amezcua is homeless.

But you wouldn’t know it by looking at him.

He doesn’t push a shopping cart, nor does he hold up a sign asking for change on the street corner.

In fact, Juan, his wife Melissa, and their three children used to be proud homeowners until the economy went south and left them without a place to call their own.

After living with Melissa’s mother for several months, the family found a temporary home, where they can all be together, at the Tacoma Rescue Mission’s St. Adams Family Campus. They have been living there since the Rescue Mission’s newest shelter opened in January of this year.

“Every year, the numbers (of homeless youth in Tacoma) have increased. And many of our families are chronically homeless, which means they are identified year after year. They just can never quite manage to maintain their own housing, or secure a living wage job.”

–Tamie Williams
Tacoma School District

“We were really lucky to get a spot here,” Juan said. “A lot of people see homelessness as a bum on the corner. I know I did.”

Juan, 36, grew up in Compton, Calif., where he witnessed how extreme poverty and lack of opportunity can breed violence and devastate a community.

Growing up without his father, Juan became influenced by his environment at an early age. He dropped out of school at 12, joined a street gang and started selling drugs.
“When other kids were carrying books, I carried a gun,” he said. “I didn’t have many options.”

Something began to change for Juan after he was arrested for gun possession more than 15 years ago.

“I was tired of it,” he said. “I thought, ‘if I stay here, I will go back to doing the same thing.’”

That’s when he decided to move to Washington to start over. He made a commitment to change for good when he met and married his wife Melissa.

He found a well-paying job as a construction foreman, started a family, and bought a house – something he never imagined was possible.

“I thought, ‘I made it,’” he said. “I thought I was invincible.”

Reality shattered the family’s American Dream in 2008. At the height of the recession, Juan lost his job and the family’s house went with it. He, Melissa and their three young children quickly found themselves homeless and without many options.

“A lot of people do have stability in their jobs, but some don’t. You could be fine one minute and in my position the next,” Melissa said.

After making a few calls to various agencies, Melissa discovered an opening at the Rescue Mission’s family shelter. The news couldn’t have come sooner.

“I’m used to being a fighter,” Juan said. “I thank God for the woman in my life.”

**NUMBERS ON THE RISE**

The Amezcuas family is just one example of the rising trend of families in Pierce County who are finding themselves newly homeless.

Their story is all too familiar in Pierce County, as the number of homeless families with children continues to steadily grow.

In Tacoma School District alone, there are 800 identified families experiencing homelessness. And beds are consistently full at the 43 shelters and housing assistance organizations across the county. Children fill the majority of those beds.
“Since the economic downturn, we’ve seen a 45 percent growth in the homeless population; the preponderance of the growth is homeless families with kids,” said David Curry, CEO of the Tacoma Rescue Mission.

Curry has served in this position for the past six years, overseeing operation and programming of all the Rescue Mission’s six Tacoma campuses, which has 500 available beds for people in need.

“Most of the time people think of the homeless as the man sleeping on the bench. Overwhelmingly, it’s moms and kids,” he said.

Curry said he has observed a consistent growth in homeless families over the last several years, with a hard-hitting economy adding even more fuel to the fire.

“These people were already at risk, and the economic stuff just put them at even more risk,” said Ellis Taylor, human resources director at the Tacoma Rescue Mission’s St. Adams campus. “Family homelessness is harder to see because they’re usually not out on the street. We have more children at the mission than single men on any given night.”

The 2010 Pierce County Homeless Survey states that each year in Pierce County an average of 2,600 households are legally evicted from their rental units. Some of these households end up homeless.

Also in Pierce County, 11.3 percent of the population is living in poverty. The majority of those households are cost burdened (meaning more than 30 percent of their income goes towards housing expenses) leaving them at a high risk of homelessness.

The survey goes on to state that Pierce County families have consistently been the fastest growing subset of the homeless population over the past decade.

“We saw growth even before the (economic downturn), but the economic downturn has sped it up and families got caught in the middle of this thing,” Curry said.

HOMELESS AT SCHOOL
Tacoma School District has had a program in place for homeless students since 1987, a time when the district couldn’t ignore the growing number of homeless families in Pierce County.
At that time, there were 76 students who attended the newly established Tone School for the Homeless.

In 2001, when the Tone School was closed because of federal legislation halting segregation of homeless students, 483 students were enrolled.

Today, there are more than 1,400 identified homeless youth in Tacoma.

The same legislation that abolished schools like Tone also established the McKinney Vento Act, which mandates that school districts provide transportation to keep homeless students at their school of origin.

This means, for example, that if a family loses its home in Tacoma and is forced to relocate to an uncle’s house in Kent, the district will pay for the school bus, public transit, or cab to bring the student to their original school – a way to keep some stability in the rocky life of the student.

Tamie Williams is the school district’s McKinney Vento liaison and also oversees the Tone Resource Center, which provides support, clothing and other necessities to homeless youth.

She began working at the Tone school back in 1988 as a nurse.

During the 2010-2011 school year, Tacoma was able to identify 800 homeless families, which included more than 1,400 students.

“In most cases, families don’t come forward and say they’re homeless,” Williams said, “unless they really have to.”

Williams oversees a network of school-based McKinney Vento liaisons, sometimes office assistants, counselors or school nurses, who can help identify when a student is homeless.

The liaisons then work with the families to see what kind of support they can offer, whether it be paid transportation, new clothing, school uniforms, shoes, toothbrushes or food. The Tone Resource Center also helps advocate for the students and their families in legal settings and helps align them with other community resources.

Transportation under the McKinney Vento Act is paid in full by the district. Tacoma School District spent about $600,000 this year on the unfunded federal mandate.

Supplies and support from the Tone Resource Center comes directly from community donations.
“We’ve never had to say we’re out of school supplies or backpacks,” Williams said.

Williams said all of the monetary donations and supplies they receive have been completely unsolicited by the Tone Resource Center. People continuously, and voluntarily, reach out to support Tone.

“It pulls at people’s heart strings to think about kids and families who don’t have homes. Tacoma is a very hard working community ... there’s not a lot of wealth. People know that this could be them. I think people just want to help. Every little bit adds up.”

A high school McKinney Vento liaison helps older students – many of them unaccompanied youth, or youth living without support from patients and guardians – to stay on track for graduation, scholarship applications and applying for college and financial aid.

Of the average 80 homeless high school seniors this year, 46 of them will be walking with their class at graduation.

“It’s so hard to imagine what it must be like to go to school and not know where you’re going to be staying that night,” Williams said. “We see lots of behavioral problems in these kids and it’s understandable.

“As (the students) get older and they realize it’s not the norm to not have their own home, that’s when you see a lot of anger, depression and shame for their family situation.”

Since 2002, the number of homeless students has increased by about 100 students a year, every year.

Williams noted that birth to age 5 is the largest population of homeless youth in Tacoma, but are not counted in the district’s tally because they are under school age.

“Every year, the numbers (of homeless youth in Tacoma) have increased. And many of our families are chronically homeless, which means they are identified year after year. They just can never quite manage to maintain their own housing, or secure a living wage job,” Williams said. “It’s not that these parents don’t want to provide stability for their kids, but for whatever reason, they’re unable to.”
MORE THAN A SHELTER
In Tacoma, emergency shelters, transitional housing programs and low-income housing all aim to keep families off the streets and get them back on track to independent living.

In Pierce County, there are more than 40 emergency shelters and housing assistance programs aimed at meeting the county’s goal of reducing chronic homelessness by 50 percent by 2015.

According to the Pierce County Homeless survey, the number of emergency shelter beds has not increased over the past 15 years (except seasonal fluctuations during cold weather months), but transitional housing options have gone from 342 in 2000 to 1,160 in 2010, indicating a response to the growing need for family housing.

Some of the biggest housing resources and homelessness support groups include the Rescue Mission, Associated Ministries, Catholic Community Services, Korean Woman’s Association, Lakewood Area Shelter Association, Salvation Army and YWCA Pierce County.

Combined, these agencies provide hundreds of beds for emergency shelter, and even more in transitional housing units, but they are still only able to meet a fraction of the need.

Pierce County and Associated Ministries’ new centralized intake program, Access Point 4 Housing, receives upwards for 150 calls daily.

“For every family we take in, we turn away four or five,” Taylor said.

Currently, Pierce County is leading an effort to reduce chronic homelessness, and shelters like the Rescue Mission are doing their part by providing as much support to homeless individuals and families to allow them to become independent again.

“What we have are hundreds of beds but thousands of people who are homeless. We want to get people motivated to get off the streets, and we’ll do everything we can to help them,” Curry said. “We don’t have the resources to support people indefinitely. We want to create dynamic situations where people can get back on their feet again.”

The Rescue Mission offers comprehensive drug and alcohol counseling, educational opportunities and job training support to residents during their 90 days in the emergency shelter, or up to two years of transitional housing and substance abuse treatment.
Taylor said that 74 percent of transitional housing graduates go on to secure and maintain housing independently.

The Rescue Mission also provides healthy meals, youth support, and a high level of interaction and responsibility of their clients, creating a strong buy-in to their program.

“Taking care of their food and shelter for 90 days helps them think about something other than food and shelter,” Taylor said. “We are really trying hard to find and identify people who are wanting to get out of homelessness. We’re hoping this is their last stop.”

THE ROAD HOME
This network of support has helped the Amezcua family begin to pick up the pieces and start over. The Rescue Mission offers options to finish school, receive free counseling for drug and alcohol addiction and help with employment assistance.

Juan, who dropped out of school at 12, is on track to finish his General Equivalency Diploma this year. Melissa will also finish up her Associates degree from Tacoma Community College and become a certified medical assistant. They both chose to enroll in the Mission’s counseling program, even though neither of them have a serious addiction problem. They’ve also taken active roles in a local church.

“The Rescue Mission is not just a place to stay, it’s helped me grow,” Juan said. “It’s given me the tools to be a better person.”

The family has the option of spending an additional year at the family center. During that time, Juan plans to continue his education, regain a living-wage job and find a permanent place for his family to live.

When they get on their feet again, the family plans to give back to others who are touched by homelessness.

“God has a great plan for us,” Juan said.