



SAM RICHE / The Star

>> **HOMEOWNERS:** Albert and Melissa Lawrence, with two of their children, Julia Lawrence and Jeremiah Jackson, are excited about their new home.

## Westside family celebrates their rise from homelessness

**By Ashley Petry**  
Star correspondent

Eight years ago, Albert and Melissa Lawrence met at a homeless shelter. Both were battling substance abuse and struggling to raise their children.

Over the ensuing years, they turned their lives around — renting an apartment, getting married and finding steady jobs.

Now, the Lawrences have reached another milestone: Last month, they purchased their first home, a four-bedroom ranch in the Eagledale neighborhood on Indianapolis' Westside.

"I can't even describe the feeling," said Melissa Lawrence, 39. "You do things that should cut you off from opportunity, but . . . God has still seen fit to bless me."

The Lawrences' 1,500-square-foot home met their key requirements: access to a bus line and enough space for three children, now 14, 15 and 16.

"They did not have crazy expectations. They knew they might have to start small," said Vicki Kenworthy-Wright, a Carpenter Realtors agent.

But the home also offered some unexpected perks, including a spacious, family-friendly kitchen.

With help from the \$8,000 federal tax credit for first-time homebuyers, the family also is planning to buy a car.

As the Lawrences settle into their

new home, other Indianapolis families still struggle with homelessness.

In January, a team coordinated by Indiana University's Center for Health Policy identified 213 homeless families in Marion County, a 78 percent jump from the previous year. The number of homeless families likely is higher, because the survey didn't include families staying with friends or relatives.

"It's bad right now, but it could still get worse," said Emily Hervey, community relations manager for the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention of Greater Indianapolis.

Habitat for Humanity of Greater Indianapolis has seen more families attending its informational seminars, said Dean Illingworth, executive director.

The organization has built 352 homes in Central Indiana since 1987, and 22 more are planned this year.

Families who receive Habitat homes must contribute "sweat equity" by helping to build them. They must also attend classes on topics such as budgeting and home maintenance.

In their first month of homeownership, the Lawrences haven't encountered anything they couldn't handle.

Instead, it all seems too good to be true, said Albert Lawrence, 49.

"It feels good to have your own home, something that you can call your own," he said.