



Photos by ZACHARY KAUFMAN/The Columbian

Erica Conger decorates a Christmas tree with her children, from left, Maddox, 4, and Ella, 2, at the apartment they recently moved into after being homeless. Maddox told his mom all he wanted for Christmas was a Christmas tree.

# Home for the holidays

Homeless veteran, children  
fulfill dream of own place –  
and tree – for Christmas

By **MARISSA HARSHMAN**  
*Columbian staff writer*

Erica Conger stood in her living room and eyed the 3-foot-tall Christmas tree in the corner.

Four-year-old Maddox and little Ella, 2, stared at the branches of the tree as the fiber optic lights changed from blue to green to pink. The little ones plucked shiny ornaments from their plastic packaging and shoved them between the branches, unwilling to wait for hooks to hang the glass balls.

In another corner, Conger knelt and began wrapping white garland around the base of a floor lamp. She evaluated the white spiral and fastened red bows to its stand.

The 27-year-old stood, surveyed the festive living room and smiled.

"Will it do?" she asked her 4-year-old son.

"Yep. It'll do," Maddox replied.

"That's the one thing Maddox asked



Ella and Maddox wrap a garland around their mother after decorating their tree Monday.

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for for Christmas: A Christmas tree," Conger said.

Conger had her own wish for this Christmas: To have a place to call home.

And thanks to a local nonprofit organization — and a generous family friend who provided the tree — both Conger and Maddox had their Christmas wishes granted.

"I feel like Santa answered my wish list early this year," Conger said. "The last thing I wanted was to have Christmas in a shelter with my kids."

Three months ago, the 27-year-old Army veteran and mother of two lost her job and was asked to move out of the house in which she was living. Conger, Maddox and Ella moved into a local shelter with a maximum 60-day stay. As the deadline to find a new place approached, Conger learned she would have a home of her own just in time for the holidays.

With the help of Partners in Careers' Homeward Bound program for veterans, Conger moved into a subsidized apartment in Hazel Dell for \$89 per month. Her rent is based on her income, which at this point is limited to child support, plus her earnings from a part-time internship at the nonprofit Partners in Careers.

"That is a blessing," she said. "I think I cried. I had been waiting so long to have my own place."

Conger and her now ex-

husband were both in the Army and set to deploy to Iraq when Conger learned she was pregnant with Maddox. Her husband deployed and Conger elected to leave the military to raise their son.

A few years later, when Conger was pregnant with Ella, her husband was again deployed overseas. During the pregnancy, Conger struggled with the realization that she was unhappy in her marriage.

In September 2009, Conger came to Vancouver for a two-week visit with family. The trip was a turning point for Conger. She asked her husband for a divorce after five years of marriage.

She and her husband agreed Conger and the kids would stay in Vancouver to be close to her friends and family. Conger started over with only the belongings she had packed for her vacation.

For two years, Conger and the kids lived in the basement of her friends' home. In October, Conger's friends asked her to move out, sending the family of three to a shelter. The family moved into their new apartment a week before Christmas.

For the kids, especially, the new home provides stability, Conger said.

"They've been happy. The last couple years have been hard, especially for (Maddox)," she said. "It's been rough. So now that I have stability, it's good."

Local veterans groups are providing the family with new beds, a dining room table, couches, dishes and linens. Most of the family's other belongings came from friends and donations made to the shelter.

In addition to offering Conger a three-month internship, Partners in Careers also provides Conger with job search assistance and interview training. Conger's internship ends next month, so she's actively looking for a more permanent office assistant job, an area in which she's well-trained.

She also plans to resume online college courses — assuming she's able to replace her broken computer — and take classes at Clark College in January. She's studying elementary education with hopes of becoming a teacher.

While Conger said the family's path isn't what she wanted for her

kids, the last few years have been a learning experience. The new home, and the stability it provides, is sending the family down its new path.

"It's good for them," Conger said as she looked at her kids. "I want them to have a place where they feel at home."

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**Erica Conger**

Recently moved into subsidized apartment

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