

For this family, remote learning one headache among many

They've also dealt with a broken oven, busted furnace recently

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Note: This story is part of the third installment of Learning Curve, a yearlong series of stories following six families whose children are attending public schools across New York state during the pandemic.

MIDDLETOWN — What happens when your oven breaks, your furnace fails, and you discover there are problems in your newly finished basement — all during the holidays?

Just ask the Jansen family.

Oh, and throw in two adults, five kiddos, two cats and a dog living under one roof. Plus remote schooling for the four oldest kids. And a pandemic.

Antoinette and Louis held it all together for the first couple of days in December amid the chaos. But once London's 8th birthday came around just days before Christmas, Antoinette had officially had her fill of 2020.

Even at the height of the pandemic in June, Luca got a decked out Sesame Street-themed cake and party to celebrate his first birthday. But on Dec. 18, as the pandemic reached new heights in the area and a snowstorm pummeled the region with more than a foot of snow, a broken oven meant Antoinette couldn't craft a celebratory confection for London that was big enough for the family to enjoy.

In a year of sacrifices, this one became the final straw for Antoinette, whose homemade cakes are a loving tradition.

"She just broke down and started crying," husband Louis recalled in January as he, Antoinette and their five children chatted in the living room.

and grading are just looser because of the circumstances.

And Leighann isn't the only one who needs to overcome a tardiness issue.

Having settled into the remote learning lifestyle, the kids are comfortable — sometimes too much so. Antoinette and Louis have noticed their children will sometimes fib about class times or due dates for classwork, or they "can't find the links" to their next meeting, Antoinette mimicked with air quotations and a knowing smile.

"It's easy to slip through the cracks, basically, because even when they have homework, there's a routine when they're in school, they come home and sit down and do their homework, but now it's difficult," Antoinette said.

In a stage whisper, Louis claimed that London pretended the day before not to know what time it was, so she was 15 minutes late to class.

"I didn't!" she whined in response. Louis laughed.

Letting out steam

The family's furnace, after a month without heat, now works — at first, so well that it sometimes reached tropical temperatures in the 80s, Louis said. That had to be fixed, too.

The family had previously spent a couple hundred dollars to spruce up the basement so one or two of the kids would have another place for school learning. But the issue with the furnace unearthed other problems in the basement, so the new carpet they put down had to be ripped up; the TV, taken down; the easel where the girls did math, relocated. Shoebox upon shoebox of storage got moved to the dining room. Having them in plain view is a stressful daily reminder to Antoinette of the disarray downstairs.

Fighting off stress takes its toll on all of them. At the end of the day — and especially the week — it's not unusual for the Jansen family to get

Keeping calm and trying to carry on

The Jansens' 1,300-square-foot home teeters on the edge of pandemic- and life-induced excitement and a middle ground of sleepy, reliable ordinariness. A couple of weeks into the new year, Christmas toys were still piled in the dining room across from an electric fireplace that doubled as one of the family's many space heaters for weeks.

They're still making it work, but it doesn't stop the family of seven from feeling closed in.

Louis and Antoinette for several weeks were — and still at times are — consumed by the seemingly never-ending mischief unfolding in the bones of their home of four years. The two rarely get a break from it all.

But the kids have had so much to keep them busy they barely noticed the problems that fell on the shoulders of their parents in recent months.

More of their classmates joined them in remote learning as all Middletown school district students switched to online-only schooling from after Thanksgiving break through Jan. 19 due to an Orange County-recommended "Holiday Pause."

None of the four students in the Jansen home said they noticed a major difference from the shift, especially since they opted in to learn from home for the rest of the school year. There just happened to be more faces on screens than students at desks in a classroom.

On a Wednesday afternoon in January, Leighann, 9, and London wore day-old open-toed low heels in their living room, and the two sisters, mid-conversation, clambered up the stairs to show off their fancy fashion and makeup skills. The shoes were a thank-you gift for all they do to help take care of 19-month-old baby Luca while the whole family is home together, Dad said.

Learning second-grade math, addition and subtraction through a computer screen is difficult, said London, clad in a sparkly turquoise dress and matching eyeshadow courtesy of her sister.

She learns in Spanish and English at Maple Hill Elementary School, reading the problem presented in Spanish out loud seamlessly in English. Solving it is sometimes tricky, but she always gets there.

so tired that they crash right after school lets out.

Spending all day, every day on the computer is draining, and Louis Jr. said he feels it in his eyes the most, although Dad joked that doesn't stop him from playing video games when he's not doing school work.

If there's a time for any of them to get some extra shut-eye, they do it. They'll have plenty of time together after.

And there's been a silver lining: A new oven, microwave and fridge, were installed and ready for use just before Louis' 42nd birthday on New Year's Day.

That's good, because the family was ready to fill seven bellies with home-cooked goods, some made with school-provided meals and products like milk and cheese that's transformed into a gooey pasta.

Once again, mornings bring the smell of fried eggs and bacon, and the big games on TV come with freshbaked chicken wings — and Antoinette and Louis playfully bickering over how best to clean up the bones.

In times like this, home life is everything — whether they like it or not — and a hint of normalcy goes a long way.



“This is what I like doing,” London says as she reads her Spanish math homework. She points out where the numerical values are in a three-digit number, “the ones,” “the tens” and “the hundreds.”

Working out the kinks

There are some wrinkles.

In a progress report, Leighann’s teacher said the fourth-grader was signing in late to several of her classes, a problem Antoinette and Louis didn’t know about until the teacher brought it to their attention. Leighann is usually a good student, who gets good grades in her advanced program, so the couple doesn’t often worry about her as much as the other three students in the home.

“She’s in the mastery program and we don’t hear much about how she’s doing,” Antoinette said. “It’s only until we get the report in the mail and we see where she needs improvement. That’s the kind of thing where they (take attendance) and that’s it, she lost her shot.”

Leighann’s grades are fine, though.

In fact, all of the kids are performing well, especially Jordan, who for the first time ever made honor roll in his special education class. It almost makes Antoinette and Louis wonder if school-at-home helps them absorb the material better, or if the assignments

London Jansen, 8, does her school work in the family's Middletown home Jan. 25. She was joined in the living room by her father Louis, her one-year old brother Luca, and her mother Antoinette. The Jansens’ four school aged children are doing full time virtual learning as their parents have opted to keep them home for the entire school year due to COVID-19 concerns. PHOTOS BY SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Louis Jansen Jr., 13, does schoolwork in his bedroom Jan. 25. The Jansen family has been through a lot amid the COVID-19 pandemic, including numerous problems with their Middletown home.