***Kevin and Jodi Klas and their five children are thankful they survived the fire that destroyed their rural Belgium home and thankful they'll spend Thanksgiving in a new house just like the old one.**

A year ago, Kevin and Jodi Klas and their five young children escaped a fire that destroyed their rural Belgium home the week before Thanksgiving.

Last week, they were all smiles as they showed off their new home, which is almost identical to the one they lost.

The family — which includes Grant, 11, Grace, 10, Greta, 8, Gabby, 7, and Grady, 3 — moved into the house Nov. 1 and is eager to celebrate the holidays this year.

Last year, they were thankful everyone escaped unharmed, but they were in shock over the loss of virtually everything they owned, including Christmas gifts they had bought the day of the fire.

It was a year of hard work — rebuilding the house, cleaning up debris and reseeding the lawn.

It was also a year of realizing how generous people can be.

“We got so many gift cards and donations. People dropped off food, clothing, toys,” Jodi said. “Living in a small community, that’s what it’s all about.”

“It makes you realize how people bond together,” Kevin said. “People we didn’t know came to help. It renews your faith in humanity.

“As much as people talk about it being a fast society and people don’t take time to talk to each other, there are a lot of good-hearted people out there. We want to thank everybody who reached out, everybody who said a prayer in our direction, because we more than appreciate it.” The low point for him, Kevin said, was when their dog Gerty, who he rescued from the fire, was killed by a car a few weeks later.

“The kids were devastated. They wanted me to bury her in the yard, so I’m chipping through ice and snow, burying my dog, and my house is in ruins behind me,” he said.

He and his wife discovered the fire about 11 p.m. Nov. 21 when they saw smoke coming from the cold air returns behind the fireplace.

They rushed upstairs to wake Grant and Grady. Jodi carried the toddler as she followed her older son to the grass circle in front of the house that they had designated as the meeting place during fire-escape practices.

Kevin ran to the girls’ bedrooms behind the fireplace. He woke Grace, who found her way to safety, but he had to carry Gabby kicking and fighting because she didn’t want to get up and hung onto Greta’s shirt as they made their way out of the smoke-filled house.

A stranger who was driving by pulled into the driveway and Kevin asked him to keep the children in his car until his father arrived to pick them up.

The couple went back into the house to get important papers and photographs. Kevin let the dog out of the basement and drove their vehicles out of the garage

before his wife told him not to go in again.

“We watched our house and our dreams burn,” Kevin said. “It went so fast.”

Kevin had built the house himself, completing it in April 2007, with the help of friends, some of whom are firefighters who tried unsuccessfully to save it.

“We want to thank all the people who are volunteers on fire departments. They donate their time and they risk their lives,” Jodi said. “They don’t know how much they’re appreciated.”

Going through the rubble was emotionally draining for both of them. Friends helped, seldom leaving them alone.

The family moved into the upper level of a duplex Kevin’s father Peter owns on Highway 57. His father and stepmother moved to a basement apartment. His step-grandmother lives on the first floor.

“Probably the most support I had through the whole thing was tearing it down because I was emotionally rundown,” Kevin said.

“Ken Schueller helped me a lot at those times when I couldn’t do anything anymore. He was my light at the end of the tunnel and kept me going when I ran out of gas. Other good friends like Sean Peiffer helped out. Even those we paid went beyond what they had to do.”

John and Paul Pierron were hired to frame the house while Kevin worked on it in the evenings and weekends. His brother Kurt did the finish carpentry, Dan Ansay rebuilt the kitchen cabinets and Rick Hughes did the staining and varnishing.

The 4,800-square-foot house with a three-car garage is beautiful. An open-concept kitchen, dining area and living room offers an expansive view of their field. A kitchen island is large enough for the family to sit around

The house is virtually the same as it was before — the same type of brick, the same colors, cabinets and counters. They even found much of the same furniture and lighting fixtures.

“If you didn’t know there was a fire, you would think you were in the same house,”

Kevin said.

It was their dream home, the couple said, so there was no reason, except one, to change it.

Grant and Grady now have bedrooms on the lower level, which also includes a large family room with patio doors.

The boys were sleeping in a room above their parents' bedroom the night of the fire.

"The fire started in the attic, which was the same level as their bedroom," Kevin said. "I feel better having them in the basement. They can get out through the door or any window."

The girls each have their own rooms — Greta and Gabby shared a bedroom before. They can also escape through windows or nearby doors.

The wood-burning fireplace, where the fire started, is now a gas fireplace.

"We wouldn't be able to sleep at night if we had a wood fireplace," Kevin said.

"I haven't started it yet. I don't know if it's subconscious or what. I'm sure it's fine."

Jodi and her friend Lucy Janke did much of the interior painting, choosing terra cotta and green shades for the great room. They painted stripes and dots on the girls' and Grady's bedroom walls. Jodi's sister-in-law Natalie Klas painted the Ozaukee Warrior logo on
Grant's wall.

The basement has an in-floor heating system with gypcrete, a gypsum underlayment, the same as the main floor. The gypcrete on the main floor kept the fire, which quickly consumed the attic floor, from reaching the basement, Kevin said.

"The most important thing is that everybody is OK," he said. "I'm thankful for that every day of my life."

Photo by Sam Arendt