

ADOPTIVE PARENTS CELEBRATE GIVING HOMES TO CHILDREN



Written by CYNTHIA ROBY



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When her husband Aaron Cosby Sr. was alive, he and his wife Juanita dreamed of adopting a second child.

The Lauderdale Lakes couple's search ended last year when they met Ashlee, now 14, at an invitation-only adoption festival hosted by ChildNet, a private, not-for-profit organization created to manage the child welfare system in Broward County.

"We searched a long time," said Juanita Cosby, 47. "When we saw Ashlee's photo in the Heart Gallery [of Broward] at church, something about her stood out. It was if she was saying, 'Take care of me.'"

The Heart Gallery is a traveling photographic and audio exhibit created to find families for children in foster care.

But the final stage of the Cosbys' adoption plan ran into uncertainty when, one month after Ashlee moved into the their home earlier this year, Aaron Cosby died.

"I kept up with the process because that's what my husband wanted," said Juanita Cosby, who is also the mother of Aaron Jr., 12 "We attended the adoption classes and had readied our lives for Ashlee."

Ashlee's adoption was finalized in March, she said.

Cosby was among some 50 adoptive and prospective adoptive couples and singles and 59 children waiting for adoption who attended the 2010 Family Fall Festival to honor local adoptive families.

Hosted by ChildNet, the Nov. 6 event marking National Adoption Month was held at Carl Weaver Park in Pompano Beach and sponsored by Omega Psi Phi fraternity.

ChildNet works with children who are removed from their biological families due to abuse, abandonment or neglect, said Sasheika Eugent, ChildNet's community and public relations specialist.

The Broward Sheriff's Office, Eugent said, will remove the children and put them in ChildNet's care. "We contract with several foster care agencies in the community to try and find them the best home possible," she said.

This is the 20th year for the festival and the seventh year that ChildNet has been involved, according to Emilio Benitez, ChildNet's president/CEO.

"Each year we bring kids and prospective parents together," said Benitez. "Our goal is to foster that natural bond and take it to another level."

It is also important, Benitez said, for adoptive parents to "meet and encourage" prospective parents.

Between 85 and 100 children under ChildNet's care are available for adoption, said Theresa Kennedy, the organization's director of permanency.

"Many prospective parents want babies and many inquirers are single," said Kennedy. "Oftentimes our children are ages 6 and older, part of a sibling group and African American."

Cosby said that it is "nice" having Ashlee in her home. "She needs to be loved, to be guided into womanhood," she said.

Ashlee and Aaron Jr. get along well, Cosby said. "They fight like siblings, but love and protect each other," she said.

Miramar couple Marta and Roy Depasquale met sisters Ashley, 15 and Caitlin, 16, at the festival in 2008.

"We bonded from the beginning," said Marta Depasquale. "It was never about age."

ChildNet, Kennedy said, does everything possible to keep siblings together.

Ashley said she and Caitlin were in foster care from ages 3 and 4. "It took me a while to get adjusted to having a permanent home," she said. Their adoption was finalized last year.

Older children, Marta Depasquale said, "are more appreciative and you really make a difference giving them a home."

- For more information on adoption or becoming a foster parent, call ChildNet's recruitment hotline at 954-414-6001 or visit www.broward.com.


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