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`Forever parents' celebrate adoptions of 22 Broward foster children

By EILEEN SOLER
Special to The Miami Herald

It was a special day at Broward County Courthouse as judges sat amid balloon bouquets, clowns cavorted with costumed characters and judicial decrees came with hugs and kisses.

``The mountain that you never thought you could ever climb is at your feet, you are on top of it and now you are in charge of the most important real estate of all -- your children," said Judge John Bellman at the start of the National Adoption Day celebration in Broward, marked with the adoptions of 22 children into ``forever families."

Foster families packed a jury room Nov. 21 to hear Bellman and representatives from local child advocate groups speak about the gift of adoption.

``We waited a year and three months for this day. Right now we all have butterflies in our stomachs," said Monique Gray, 37, there with her five biological children and her soon-to-be-sons Latravis, 7, and Eric, 6.

The event was the sixth annual National Adoption Day celebration organized by ChildNet, a government-sanctioned agency that finds safe and loving homes for children removed from biological parents because of abuse, neglect or abandonment. Hundreds of

families nationwide chose to finalize their adoptions Nov. 21.

Of the 875 children in foster care in Broward County, 79 remain eligible for adoption, according to ChildNet.

Gray, of Pompano Beach, a single mother and patient-care assistant at Memorial Regional Hospital, said she and her other children fell in love with Latravis and Eric after seeing the brothers online at the Heart Gallery of Broward County website.

The site, www.heartgalleryofbroward.org, features foster children waiting for permanent adoption.

``As soon as we saw Latravis and Eric, we knew they were a perfect match and we arranged to meet them," Gray said. ``We all fit together now."

Emilio Benitez, president of ChildNet, said the adoptions were happy endings to months and years in foster care.

``We are an agency of 350 people who guide foster children and foster parents through a

sometimes trying process . . . but we can never do it alone," Benitez said.

On Nov. 20, at the Pembroke Pines home of Georgina Herbert, Benitez met with the heads of several government offices and agencies, including Florida Department of Children and Families Secretary George Sheldon and Jim DeBeaugrine, director of the Agency for Persons with Disabilities.

There, with Herbert and her foster son, Kaydrin, 9, the group celebrated as it crossed the last obstacle toward Kaydrin's adoption, which took eight years and the collaboration of many state and county agencies.

``Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night and be afraid someone would come to take Kaydrin from me. Who would love him then?" Herbert said.

Kaydrin was an infant who was shaken so violently by a biological parent that he was not expected to survive when he arrived at Herbert's home in 2000. Herbert, a registered nurse with three biological sons and two other adopted children, nursed Kaydrin to health, but he was left severely disabled.

Herbert wanted to adopt Kaydrin since 2001, but while she was permitted to foster him, adoption was not allowed until she renovated her home to meet accessibility standards. She was also required to provide a hospital bed and to have other medical equipment on hand.

``This is a case of Catch 22 -- we had a mother who loves a child but she cannot fully be his mother," Sheldon said.

Of the 79 children now eligible for adoption, 24 of those have disabilities, according to ChildNet.

The bill for home modifications, \$30,000, was raised by the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Agency for Health Care Administration, ChildNet, Forever Family, Creative Kids Care, and 4Kids of South Florida.

Kaydrin's adoption is now set for Dec. 16.

``A large majority of adoptive parents start out as foster parents and become forever parents," Benitez said. ``Georgina is one of those angels."

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