

Traveling photo exhibit a gallery of hope for Broward's foster kids



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POMPANO BEACH - Before she knew their history, Monique Gray fell in love with their picture.

The two boys were standing beside a tree—one in a crisp white shirt and khaki pants, the other with his hand on his little brother's shoulder, staring directly into the camera.

"They just looked like a good match for my family," said Gray, a divorced mother of five who adopted Latravis, 7, and Eric, 6, in November after months of supervised visits and overnight stays.

It was another match that began in part with the Heart Gallery of Broward County, a traveling photo exhibit of kids in foster care, which also can be viewed online at <http://www.heartgalleryofbroward.org>. Its mission is to put real faces on the need to find parents for these children.

"People are more likely to respond to an image that pulls at the heartstrings," said Allen Smith, professor of marketing at Florida Atlantic University. "Adoption is one of those things that start with a feeling."

Every picture is professionally shot, and each contains a child's relentless hope to find a parent who will love them.

But capturing those feelings is not always easy. While some kids are eager to pose, others are more reticent. With so much resting on every picture, photographers say they often have to wait several hours for a child to warm up to the camera.

Latravis, 7, and Eric 6, with their new mom Monique Gray. A picture's worth a thousand words, but for Latravis, 7, and Eric, 6, their picture (in the background) was worth even more. It held their hopes to one day be adopted. Recently the brothers' adoption was finalized. She said she bonded with the boys the first time she saw their photo. (Mike Stocker, Sun Sentinel / November 23, 2009)

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Gallery officials carefully select the scenery, often opting for places where the kids can have fun so they can be natural and not focus on having their picture taken.

The results speak for themselves.

There's five-year-old Nephreteri, with a big smile and a flower in her hair, captured in black and white. Kevin, a 13-year-old with freckles, lying down on his back in a sports jersey. And Aldayenne, a 15-year-old, posing beside a tropical plant at a side profile.

Not all the 220 eligible for adoption opt to be part of the gallery. Some don't want the attention and have concerns about their peers knowing they're in the state's care.

Each picture is accompanied by a short description of the child, written by an adoption supervisor or child advocate.

The photo shoots are done by volunteer professional photographers and a panel of adoption specialists and the Heart Gallery's executive director select the picture they feel best captures that child's personality.

"We're allowing these children to advocate on their own behalf, through their pictures and through their smile," said Matthew Straeb, the local Heart Gallery's co-founder.

The first Heart Gallery was launched in Santa Fe, N.M. in 2001 and since then, about 140 others have formed nationwide.

Broward's gallery began about three years ago. Sasheika Eugent, a spokeswoman for ChildNet, which handles adoption services for Broward County, said the gallery is playing a big role in helping the agency meet its goals.

Photographer Wick Beavers, of Miami, said getting Latravis and Eric to open up wasn't hard.

"The boys had a lot of energy," he said.

Beavers shot them on swings and on a jungle gym, but in the end it was the picture of them standing beside an old tree that made the cut. In it, Eric is showing his two rows of baby teeth; Latravis has him in a firm embrace.

In that picture, Gray, a 37-year-old patient care technician, saw the boys' hopes and realized her own dreams.

Their adoption was finalized on Nov.21.

"They come in and they hug me and I feel rich in love," Gray said.

The family has the picture that used to hang in the Heart Gallery but the boys don't harp on it. After all, the aim of the gallery is to one day say goodbye.

Georgia East can be reached at geast@sunsentinel.com or 954-572-2078.

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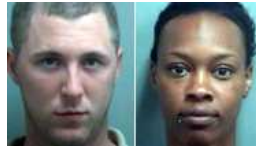
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