

## OLDER CHILDREN OVERLOOKED IN ADOPTION



Written by KRISTAL ROBERTS



POMPANO BEACH – Hoping to find children they can one day call their own, single people and married couples came to an invitation-only adoption festival last weekend.

But the day was bittersweet, as many of the older children remained left behind in the foster-care system.

The Oct. 31 festival at Carl Weaver Park in Pompano Beach marked the nineteenth year that ChildNet, the lead agency in managing local adoption and foster care services in Broward County, partnered with Omega Psi Phi fraternity to kickoff November, National Adoption Month.

It was an opportunity for potential adoptive parents to mingle with children in the foster care system and enjoy a relaxed atmosphere filled with music, games and barbecue.

Hilma Powell, a massage therapist in Fort Lauderdale, came to the festival hoping to meet a little girl.

"I only want one child so I can give them attention, which I think is good for them. I'm looking between (ages) 7 and 9, the age they're already very independent," Powell said.

Husband and wife Mark Rodriguez, 38, and Teresa Rodriguez, 49, said they hope to adopt a child between the ages of five and 10.

"We don't have any children of our own, we were older when we got married, so this is an opportunity to have a family," Mark Rodriguez said.

Ron Stokes, 45, and Wendy Stokes, 49 have been temporary foster parents for several years and now they want the chance to be "mom and dad" to a child, forever.

"This is the first time we're doing something for our family, so we can have that 'forever family' that you hear people talk about," Wendy Stokes said.

Alleviating the pressure of feeling like a child on display, the children were told that the special day was merely a festival.

"You can't mention anything about adoption here, we were told that," Wendy said.

Most of the children in the Stokes' preferred adoption age range of 2 to 12 were not aware that they might have played a game or eaten a hot dog with their future parents.

But Jim McElhannon, adoption specialist at ChildNet, said the older children are fully aware of the potential adopters at the festival, and many are jaded by the rejection as they age.

"The little ones don't (know what's happening) but the older kids, they know exactly what's going on, and they know who these people are. Its tough, you get about 8 or 9 years old, no one wants you anymore," McElhannon said.

Though ChildNet gets a higher demand for younger children, as of October, 57 of the 79 children currently available for adoption are 12 and older, 13 children are ages 6-11, and only 9 children range from newborns to 5-year-olds. 70 percent of these children are black.

"Most of these kids are in some sort of therapy adoption therapy, where the therapist will talk to them about the importance of being adopted, or you are going to turn 18 and be on the street with no family," said McElhannon said.

Despite experiencing years of living in and out of foster care, Willie, an African-American 17-year-

old male, has not given up hope on finding a family to love him.

"I hope that I find somebody that just wants to be my parent and be there for me. Just somebody that's going to spend time with me, a father figure, I want a father figure." Willie said.

Lanecia Radcliff, who finds homes for the children at ChildNet, said Willie is part of growing group of young adults who have been in the foster care system for the longest period of time.

"There is a special project with the governor's office, The 100 Longest Waiting children in Florida. He was identified as one of them. Willie has been in the system since he was born," Radcliffe said.

If Willie isn't adopted by Jan. 23, his 18th birthday, he will age out of the system, meaning he will be on his own.

Though Willie prefers to be adopted, he has made plans, should things not go his way.

"I'll go to trade school and do construction, I like fixing things with my hands, and I'll get an apartment" Willie said.

He said he is aware that his parents terminated their rights to him as a child, but Willie hopes to reunite with them after he turns 18.

"I'll probably stay in Fort Lauderdale until I get stable and see if I can find my family in Georgia," he said.

For more information about fostering or adopting, call our Recruitment Hotline at 954-414-6001.

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*Photo: Willie, 17, hopes that a loving family will adopt him.*


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