

THIRTY ADOPTIONS FINALIZED AT BROWARD COURTHOUSE

Written by KRISTAL ROBERTS



FORT LAUDERDALE — Clusters of adoptive parents, children and friends lined up in front of the Broward County Central Courthouse on a recent Saturday.

They were waiting to make their new family status official on Nov. 21, National Adoption Day.

The day not only included a legal proceeding, but also a celebration with balloons, Christmas décor, gifts and Mrs. Santa Claus smiling at children who were no longer going to be wards of the state.

Broward Circuit Court Judge Barbara McCarthy, one of the four judges officiating adoptions that day, made this point clear.

"Once I sign, you will step into the shoes of the biological parent," McCarthy told the parents. "You have all the rights and obligations, but you also have the joy of these children. You will be the forever mommy."

For new "Forever Mommy" Monique Gray, getting to the finish line of seeing the adoption documents signed marked the end of a long, but rewarding journey.

"The hardest part was the wait!" Gray said.

With five biological children, Gray, 37, of Pompano Beach, said she became interested in adoption after watching a "Forever Families" program on local news channel WFOR-CBS 4. After completing a mandatory adoption class, Gray went on the Heart Gallery of Broward County's website in August 2008, and asked her children to help her look.

The Heart Gallery features a host of children who are in need of adoption.

Gray and her children were drawn to brothers Eric, 6, and Latravis, 7, who reminded them of family members.

"So I contact Lanecia Radcliff (ChildNet adoption home finder), but she said that they (Eric and Latravis) were already going to be adopted. So I said, 'If it falls through, call me back,' " Gray said.

ChildNet is a non-profit that manages the services and support systems for foster children in Broward.

Radcliff ended up calling her back, and Gray was able to start the adoption process. Fifteen months later, the children are officially hers.

Eric and Latravis were two of over 30 children who were adopted on Nov. 21, but were the only siblings who had their previous foster parents in attendance.

Former foster parents Stephen Durand and Nicole Durand took care of the siblings for the last four years. They addressed the court and gave Gray their blessing.

"Yes I want to say that I'm very glad...when they came to our house about four years ago, I heard that they were going from foster home to foster home, so my wife and I said, 'We are not going to allow them to go from place to place, we will keep them until they find a permanent home for

them,' " Stephen Durand said.

"This is a glorious day for us. Ms. Monique, I can see the work that you have been doing, please keep on doing it!" he added.

The photograph of Eric and Latravis in the Heart Gallery that caught Gray's eye was presented to her.

Matthew Straeb, co-founder of the Broward Heart Gallery, received a governor's award for his efforts, and adoption rates have risen 25 percent since the photo gallery displaying adoptable children went on the Internet.

"It really is a privilege," Straeb said. "There's a lot of people involved at the heart gallery, but most importantly, it is the courageous adoptive parents."

Gray said she looks forward to the future, and is happy that her new sons will legally share her last name, though it never made a difference to Eric and Latravis.

"The children have been calling me 'Mommy' since I got them in June," she said.


For more information about becoming a foster or adoptive parent, please call ChildNet's Recruitment Hotline at 954-414-6001.


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