Two-year process culminates with couple adopting boy, 10

Two-year process brings couple and boy together

The courtroom applauds as Ron and Jackie Ludwig officially become the parents of Steven, 10. "I've been waiting for this for almost three years," Steven said. (Sun-Sentinel/Andrew Innerarity / November 17, 2007)

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FORT LAUDERDALE

Ron and Jackie Ludwig, both 54, never had any children, and they were fine with it that way.

Then the one-time high school sweethearts met Steven, a friend's nephew, who was about to slip into the foster care system.That was the start of the Ludwigs' two-year journey into parenthood.

On Saturday, 10-year-old Steven officially became their son — one of about 30 adoptions finalized at the Broward County Courthouse for National Adoption Day.

"The fact that this has happened is a miracle," said Jackie Ludwig, a legal affairs secretary from Fort Lauderdale.

"It's just so strange. It came about by such bizarre circumstances."

At the courthouse, Steven, dressed in a pin-striped suit and wearing an ear-to-ear smile, mingled with his cousins and friends amid cake and balloons before streaming into the courtroom with about 20 supporters. In Room 519 he told Broward Circuit Court Judge Maria Garcia-Wood, "I've been waiting for this for almost three years."

Sitting at his side, Ron Ludwig held back tears as he told the judge how much Steven meant to him.

"That this child was brought into our life was a miracle and a testimony to God," he said. "I'm so proud to call him my son."

Celebrated every year on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, National Adoption Day is part of an effort by child welfare agencies and advocates to raise awareness about adoption. About 100 children in Broward have been adopted since July.

But there are about 1,000 children in the state's system who are eligible for adoption, including about 130 in Broward County.

"This is what gives us the renewal to keep doing our job," said Theresa Kennedy, director of permanency at Childnet. "It's a whole morning and afternoon of just happy endings in an area where sometimes we don't get to see the happy ending of things."

Ron Ludwig, a fiber optics technician, said children had never been a priority for him because growing up he never knew his biological dad. Ludwig said he was told that his stepfather, who had adopted him as a child, was his real father. When he learned that was not true and tried to make contact with his biological father, it was too late. His father had died.

"I was kind of cynical about the world back then," he said. "I thought I didn't want to bring a child into the world."

The story of how Steven ended up with Ron and Jackie Ludwig is complicated.

"My dad walked out of my life when I was 6 months, and I didn't see him again until I was 8," said Steven.

His mother wasn't able to care for him, and for most of his life Steven's grandmother was his sole caretaker, Ron Ludwig said.

"We didn't have much money," Steven said, and at times his grandmother's house was in such disrepair that social workers questioned if he and his cousins should stay there.

In 2005, Steven's grandmother died of a heart attack. An aunt and uncle who had adopted one of Steven's cousins took him in with the intention it would be temporary until Steven's mother could care for him.

Jackie Ludwig knew the family because they lived next door to her father.

Every Saturday, Jackie Ludwig visits her dad for breakfast, a routine they began after her mother died in 2001. Steven was introduced to her by one of his family members during one of her weekend visits at her dad's house.

Soon, Steven was joining them on a regular basis, and within months, Debbie Beye-Barwick, Steven's aunt, gave Jackie Ludwig permission to take Steven with her to church on Sundays. Then he would stay at the Ludwigs' Fort Lauderdale house on weekends.

"One weekend my aunt asked them to take me to school, and I've been here ever since," said Steven.

When it became apparent that Beye-Barwick and her family were feeling the strain of having their family grow so fast unexpectedly, the Ludwigs stepped in.

"They were going to have to give him up, and he would be in foster care," said Ron Ludwig. "We decided we couldn't let that happen to him."

The Ludwigs tracked down Steven's mother to get her permission to terminate her parental rights.

"It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do," said Ron Ludwig, but they promised she could remain a part of Steven's life.

Tracking his father was tricky because he was out of town and not working at a permanent job. He was not in a situation where he could care for Steven, and once he was found, he agreed with the adoption.

"When we were in search of my dad, I thought it would never end," Steven said.

But Childnet child advocate Mel Smith, who was assigned to the family, said Steven never wavered. He wanted all along to be adopted by Ron and Jackie Ludwig.

The pictures on the Ludwigs' computer tell the story of the past two years together.

There's the trip to Disney World, Steven and his dad at the golf course, Steven's Boy Scout trips and church pals. One of their favorites shows Steven and Ron Ludwig at the stove cooking.

Steven still gets to see his aunt and uncle who live nearby. On Saturday three of his cousins, who used to live with Steven at his grandmother's house and have since been adopted, joined him at his adoption hearing.

"It was meant to be," Jackie Ludwig said.

"He just sort of completes us."

For more information on adopting or becoming a foster parent, you can call Childnet's recruitment hotline at 954-414-6001 or see www.childnet.us.

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