

March 21, 2005

## Show Them Your Best 'Take Me Home' Face

By TINA KELLEY

**N**EWARK, March 19 - Jaillah's first smile was unconvincing, a tense lowering of his lower lip.

The photographer, Michael LeBrecht, asked about his favorite sports. He suggested turning the chair around so Jaillah could straddle it. He told him to think of something funny. Jaillah tried. And he tried smiling again - more of a wince this time.

The melting began when Mr. LeBrecht gave him a slightly droopy orange helium balloon. Jaillah started to spin it on his finger. He tapped it up high and headed it on the way down, his arms spread out. Mr. LeBrecht leaned in, the lens a foot or so from Jaillah's face.

"Excellent," Mr. LeBrecht said softly, "excellent."

So much was at stake in the search for Jaillah's truest smile. He and 48 other foster children gathered here on Saturday at the William Clark Mansion, also known as the North Ward Center, to have their portraits taken by professional photographers for the state's Heart Gallery, a planned exhibit of more than 300 children available for adoption, some of whom have had about as many foster homes as birthdays.

Organizers hope that if more people see compelling portraits of Jaillah and other children like him - life-size and lively - more will consider adoption. The pictures will be displayed in at least 15 shows across the state, as well as online at [www.heartgallerynj.com](http://www.heartgallerynj.com).

Jaillah is 10 years old and one of seven children. He met his younger sister, another foster child, for the first time on Saturday. To figure how much younger she was, he put down his cup and his napkin and used his fingers to do the math. Seven years. Perhaps they could live together someday.

"I'm already in a nice home," he said, referring to his foster home. "They treat me right. They feed me and stuff."

But Jaillah wants to be adopted.

So do 126,000 children in state care across the country, said Diane Granito, the recruitment event coordinator for the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department. She brought together the first Heart Gallery in Santa Fe, N.M., in 2001. Since then, there have been more than a dozen similar shows, including one in Hartford that helped place 19 of 40 children in adoptive homes. Nationally, three photographers involved in Heart Galleries have adopted children, Ms. Granito said.

James M. Davy, commissioner of the Department of Human Services in New Jersey, said that the state had a brochure with head shots of the children, but that the pictures were not portrait quality.

"People will come to this like artwork," he said, watching the children being photographed. "This will be bringing people to see them, and hopefully entice someone to open up their hearts and homes."

The organizer of the New Jersey Heart Gallery show, Najlah Feanny Hicks, a magazine photographer, said 150 photographers volunteered to shoot the 328 children in New Jersey who are legally free to be adopted by people in any state, although there are at least 8,500 in foster care.

"A lot of us are in their mid-40's, and many of us are starting to have families late in life," she said. "We've been all over the world and seen everything there is to see."

"We have covered history, everywhere, and this is one chance to not only document history, but to actually change the history of a child's life."

Pim Van Hemmen, an organizer of the project and assistant managing editor for photography at The Star-Ledger of Newark, said some children had been in the system so long, they had become almost invisible.

"Nobody knows who they are besides their caseworker and foster parents," he said. "We can put a face on them. These kids have been in the dark, and we're putting some light on them."

Ms. Feanny Hicks said the 10 photographers working on Saturday had shot movie stars, rock stars and presidents. "These kids have been abused and neglected, they've been in numerous foster homes, and they have numerous needs," she said. "These photographers are here to give them the dignity they've never gotten, the dignity they deserve."

The photographers chose creative angles and settings. Hasson, 12, was photographed doing a handstand.

"When people see that, they like me," he said. When he imagines a permanent home, he thinks of a swing set, a big backyard and a white female dog named Snowy; no, Suggie, short for Sugar.

The first time he tried a back flip, he said, he landed on his head and got a nosebleed. So he tried again.

"I wasn't going to be scared anymore," he said. "Because I'm brave."

Nashira, 11, was photographed on a jungle gym. She hopes for a family that will spoil her, meaning let her have a pet and send her to college. She said that the camera loved her and that the picture would help people get to know her personality, which she described as "funny, smart and gorgeous."

And humble? "Yes, and honest," she said. She likes to read, sing, and write songs, and she said she had skipped a grade. She prays for a home and for good grades.

"And when people are poor, I pray for them to get a home," she said.

Then there were Cierra, 14, and her brother, Jarrell, 11, photographed together. She lives in East Camden, he lives in Hackensack, and they see each other once a month.

"We had a little sister," Jarrell said, looking to Cierra for confirmation. She said no.

"I saw that in my dream before," he said. "I thought it was real." He would like not to be the youngest, he explained.

On the landing of the mansion's grand carved staircase, liquid arpeggios of laughter rose from a boy named Kenneth as he looked at pictures of himself on the display screen of Jeff Zelevansky's camera.

Kenneth, 8, wore a crisply creased suit that makes him happy, because it is "kind of like a church outfit." His caseworker, Joann Ali, said he had been in an adoptive home for two and a half years, but was unfortunately up for adoption again.

"He's a sweet, good child, he really is," she said. "He does well academically in school. He's very proper, mannerly and polite."

Asked what his favorite classes were, he said gym and spelling. And what was the hardest word he could spell? America. And how does he spell America?

"I don't know," he said. "It's the hardest thing I ever spelled."

Asked whom he lived with, he said, "Nana." And whom did he want to live with?

"You."

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