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Special day for families fulfilled through adoption

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TRENTON — Hope Crumbley says the moment her foster children came into her home years ago they became her own. Yesterday she celebrated the law finally catching up with what her heart has known all along.

“We’re a family. We are unified forever,” she said of the three children she adopted this year.

The Ewing resident was among dozens of adults and children gathered at the Masonic Temple to celebrate Adoption Day and honor families across the state whose adoptions were finalized this year.

Among the celebrants enjoying a buffet breakfast and lots of good cheer were approximately 23 children in foster care whose adoptions were finalized in court hearings earlier in the day. Four private adoptions were finalized as well.

Ann Jones-Hooks adopted her four grandchildren, ages 11, 9, 8 and 4, whose mother is unable to care for them.

The city resident said she found it heartwarming to be among so many people celebrating the families they’ve formed by opening up their hearts and their homes.

“It makes you feel really good inside that there are people out there who really care,” she said.

Approximately 220 children statewide were adopted this year and counties across the state held similar celebrations, according to the state Department of Children and Families.

“Adoption Month events are so important because they give us all the opportunity to celebrate recently finalized adoptions, and raise awareness of the many children in foster care waiting to find permanent families,” said DCF Commissioner Allison Blake.

It was the second year in a row that Hamilton resident Jamie Bennett was among those celebrating a new adoption.

Last year Bennett and her husband adopted 3-year-old Tyrell. This year they adopted Reggie, who is almost 4.

A speaker at both adoption day celebrations, Bennett this year spoke to parents about the relief of becoming a permanent family.

"When we take in children as foster placements we don't know if we will be part of their forever family or someone else will," Bennett said. "It's a huge relief when the law recognizes the family you've been building day by day."

A little wiser than the new adoptive parent she was when she spoke to last year's crowd, Bennett spoke to parents about the rigors that come with raising adopted children.

"We have the same challenges as any family but on top of that there are different layers of challenges we face," she said. "There is the loss the children feel as a result of growing up without their biological families, even when they come into the adoptive home very early as our kids did. But as adoptive parents, that's part of our jobs."

All parents yesterday felt a measure of relief that their adoptions were finally legal, she said.

"There is an undeniable security in having that legal recognition as the parent. It's a completely different world," she said. "You have dreams of what it will be like to feel that security but you don't know how it feels until you get it."

Crumbley agreed. Last spring she adopted Raven, 8, Jourdan, 7, and Skylar, 5. Sons Walter, 8, adopted three years ago, and biological son Michael, 14, round out their family of six.

Yesterday was all about permanency, Crumbley said.

"It's finally over," she said. "No more caseworkers, no more home visits, no possibility that your children may go. All that is over."

Patti Amor, Assistant Family Division Manager for the Mercer County Courts, said yesterday was a welcomed opportunity to celebrate family court matters.

"Family court is filled day after day with people divorcing, people arguing about child support and issues of juvenile delinquency and domestic abuse," she said. "Uniting families through adoption is the one aspect of family court that is happy, the one thing we do that is joyous."

She said the clear message yesterday is that some families are made, not born.

"Family is not just the sharing of DNA," she said. "A family has more to do with love and commitment and that's what happens on Adoption Day. People commit themselves to forming a family with children who need them."

According to the Department of Children and Families, while states across the country are facing shortages of foster parents, New Jersey's foster program is thriving thanks to successful foster home recruitment and adoption practice advancements. Since 2006, DCF's Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) has recruited an impressive number of foster and adoptive homes, referred to as resource families. In 2009 alone, 2,123 new resource families were recruited. It is the second highest number on record of total homes recruited in New Jersey in a single year.