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Teens hope to win hearts of new parents

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BY LISA CORYELL

TRENTON -- Henry has been in the state foster care system all his life.

Moved from the maternity ward to his first foster home 16 years ago, the soft-spoken, handsome young man is still holding out hope that he'll be adopted.

"Why not?," he asked. "I'm a good speaker. Why not adopt me?"

But as one of New Jersey's "100 Waiting Children" who have been in foster care the longest, Henry knows the deck is stacked against him.

"I want to be adopted but every day I see no one is interested, I prepare myself just in case things don't go the way I want them to go," he said. "I will not make myself depressed over the situation."

Henry is so steeled against potential disappointment, he's almost convinced himself that being adopted doesn't really matter anymore.

"I'm getting to the age where I'm saying, 'Why bother?'" he said.

But Henry, who lives in a treatment facility in New Brunswick, and dozens of older kids like him are still holding out hope.

That's why they've agreed to take part in the New Jersey Heart Gallery's 100 Waiting Children project, an initiative that publicly displays their photos and biographies in hopes of catching the eye of potential adoptive parents. The traveling gallery spends monthlong stints in libraries, churches and community centers statewide.

At least once in each venue, an event is held to educate the public on the state adoption system and the kids who need homes. Many of the teens featured in the photos attend the events where they go onstage to introduce themselves. Some explain what it's like to spend their whole life in foster care, some take the opportunity to extol the virtues of adopting older children, others simply offer up their dreams and goals and hope their words strike a chord in a listener.

At a recent service held at Shiloh Baptist Church in Trenton -- where the gallery is currently on display -- 16-year-old Rashon recited a poem he wrote minutes before being called onstage. He said in part:

Trapped inside and it seems I can't win

I've been stepped on, spit at

And I felt like giving in

But as life goes on I say I'll never stop

Where as I think about the miles I've traveled

I've made it to the top

Darryl Bender, in one of her last public appearances before retiring as the assistant director of adoptions for the state last week, told the Shiloh audience that Rashon's words speak volumes.

"You don't need to sell these kids," Bender said. "If you let them speak, they sell themselves."

A MARKETING PLANS

And marketing these kids to potential adoptive parents is what Heart Gallery of New Jersey is all about.

Modeled after a national effort that began in Santa Fe seven years ago, New Jersey's Heart Gallery displays oversized, professionally shot portraits that "help capture the individuality and spirit of each foster child who is eligible to be adopted," according to the nonprofit group's website. "These photographs are then shared via the web and through gallery exhibits in the hope that potential families will be moved to inquire about adoption."

New Jersey Heart Gallery's first exhibit debuted at the Liberty Science Center in Jersey City in June 2005. It featured 346 New Jersey foster children considered "hard to adopt" because of age, special needs or a desire to be placed with siblings.

For more than a year, the gallery traveled the state, garnering worldwide attention. Within the first six months of the exhibit, the New Jersey Heart Gallery's website received 23 million hits and generated thousands of inquiries at the state Division of Youth and Family Services, which oversees adoption services in New Jersey. To date, more than 135 children featured in the 2005 gallery have been adopted.

But state officials, grateful for the interest the exhibit generated, were dismayed to note a pattern in the inquiries they received.

"Who did we get the phone calls for? The cute little children, the ones who were under the age of 5," said Bender.

Those entrenched in the DYFS system were all too familiar with the difficulties in sparking interest in older kids.

BACKLOG PROMPTS SUIT

Even as Heart Gallery of New Jersey was celebrating the success of its new endeavor, DYFS officials were fielding criticism that its backlog of legally free children awaiting adoption had hit a historic high. At 2,200, the list featured a disproportionately high number of teens.

In July 2006, the state reached an agreement with Children's Rights Inc. of New York, the group that had sued the state over its child welfare practices. The settlement removed the threat of a federal takeover but continued a court-ordered monitoring of reforms until at least 2012.

Among the terms settled upon, DYFS agreed to reduce its adoption backlog. The agency also agreed to ramp up its efforts to find homes for the teenagers who had been languishing in the system for years.

Within a year of the settlement, DYFS had nearly halved its backlog to 1,300 kids.

"We knew we were doing well with the younger kids but these older children really had to be our target," Bender said. "We really had to put efforts into finding them homes."

To that end, DYFS this year reassigned six adoption specialists to work exclusively with some 100 kids waiting longest for adoption.

Called recruiters, the workers' strategies include mining the teens' past records in hopes of uncovering long-

lost relatives, foster parents, neighbors or even teachers who might adopt them. Recruiters also network with community groups and other social agencies to drum up interest in adopting older teens.

THE SECOND WAVE

It was in this environment that the New Jersey Heart Gallery launched its second set of photos comprised entirely of the state's "100 Waiting Children." Unveiled at the Liberty Science Center in Jersey City last January, the gallery is credited as an enormous help to the state's placement efforts.

"It's a recruitment tool and an awareness tool," said Kate Bernyk, a DYFS spokeswoman. "Hopefully we'll find parents for the kids in the gallery and hopefully it will inspire people to inquire about being adoptive parents."

Older people who have raised their own children and know the pitfalls and rewards of rearing teenagers make the best adoptive parents for older kids, said Ellen Kelly, a former DYFS adoption field manager who last week replaced Bender.

"Taking on a 13-year-old is not daunting to them," Kelly said.

BEST FOOT FORWARD

But savvy teens like Rashon realize its important for them to make themselves look as attractive as possible to potential adoptive parents. More often than not, as the 100 Waiting Children gallery makes its way around the state, Rashon can be found in the audience representing his fellow foster children.

Although his adoption is already in the works, Rashon says he's there to speak for the still waiting.

"The part I want to play is to help the other children who aren't good at speaking," he said.

There are many of them. You can see them fidgeting in their seats as a slide show featuring the gallery plays for the audience. They cringe and dip their heads when an enthusiastic Bender tries to lure them onstage to speak as the audience claps in anticipation. After much cajoling from Bender, they might be moved to give an embarrassed wave from their seats.

Part of their behavior stems from an adolescent shyness inherent in most kids of a certain age. But part of it is comes from a darker place that lives in every foster kid who has taken a promise at face value and been disappointed. "Some of them are so used to getting to a certain point (in the adoption process) and then being let down that they start putting up a wall," said Gloria Burnett Harrsion, statewide Adoption Recruitment coordinator.

It's a self-defense mechanism that often gives foster teens an air of indifference.

"There's a misconception that teens don't always want to be adopted," said Christine Mozes, director of DYFS. "Teens do want families and they do want to be adopted and have families to be a part of when they're in their 20s. The fact that they're willing to put themselves out there tells you they want and need families."

RACING THE CLOCK

As they near adulthood, many teens find it difficult to admit they're still looking for happiness wrapped up in a white picket fence.

"Right now it's complicated," said Linda, 17, who has lived in foster care since age 8. "I'm gonna be 18 and be able to be on my own soon. It would be nice to be on my own, but it would be nice to have a family to help me with certain life skills I need to learn to be on my own."

Those life skills range from knowing how to balance a checkbook and stretch a paycheck to how to remedy a red-sock-in-the-white-wash disaster.

"At 18, you may think they're adults but it's really important for them to have guidance," said Shauna Anderson, one of the six recruiters assigned to the teens.

And to children who have grown up adrift in the foster care system, an adoption certificate ensures a future of belonging somewhere.

"It's a legally binding document that entitles a child to a lot of things within a family," said Burnett-Harrison. "It seals the deal on the permanency. It gives the child something to hold onto. It represents a permanent connection. And society looks at that paper and respects it."

Linda, who is ambivalent about being adopted, recognizes the lifelong connection the certificate symbolizes. "To me, a family will always be there for you. Someone who accepts you for who you are and loves you unconditionally," she said. "I know my friends and foster family loves me. But unconditionally? That's hard to come by."

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