

CHS in the News



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'Forever families' forged at National Adoption Day ceremony in West Palm Beach

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by Hannah Phillips

WEST PALM BEACH — Children packed into a courtroom Friday, some timid and others wailing. One searched in vain for the therapy dog she'd seen on the way in, and then looked like she might start wailing, too. The face-painter was gone, and the magician had vanished. The only thing left were grown-ups in black robes.

The judges smiled. The real fun, they promised, was about to begin.

Though some of the children were too young to realize it, they were on the brink of joining their forever families. Their soon-to-be adoptive parents beamed beside them during an all-day event at the Palm Beach County Courthouse on Friday.

In Palm Beach County, 113 children wait to be adopted

Judges oversaw the adoption of 17 children into 12 families, finalizing in minutes what some had spent years waiting for. Similar ceremonies took place across the U.S. as part of National Adoption Day, held each year to raise awareness for the many children still waiting to be adopted.

There are 113 in Palm Beach County and more than 100,000 across the country, according to ChildNet, one of the local child-welfare agencies that helped to host Friday's event.

Its employees decorated the courthouse with balloons and teddy bears for each child Friday. For their newly made parents, most of whom were first-timers, keynote speaker Sharonda Jones offered some advice.

"Many people think they can change a child to fit their own desires, not realizing that we, in fact, have to change ourselves to fit the needs of our child," she said.

She spoke of the trust issues that plagued her own adopted son, and how it taught her to be more patient and more loving. The son in question watched from the courtroom gallery with his iPhone set to record. He zoomed in on his mother's face and smiled.

"We must empathize with our child's struggles," Jones said. "Listen without judgment. Create a healing environment where our child feels safe to express their emotions."

Message to adoptive parents: Empathize, listen, help them heal

All around the room, parents nodded. Many of their adopted children were victims of abuse and neglect. Some languished for years in a state of limbo — no longer in the care of their biological parent, but not formally adopted by a new one, either.

Amy Garvin-Liddell, the adoption program manager for Children's Home Society of Florida, said the lengthiest part of the adoption process is deciding when and whether to terminate a biological parent's right to their child. Reunification between children and their biological parent is the No. 1 goal, Garvin-Liddell said.

Parents can have more than a year to regain custody over their child by meeting certain requirements. Only once a parent turns down or stops participating in reunification attempts does the goal become adoption.

'Forever family!': Joy fills courthouse on National Adoption Day

Friday's ceremony eclipsed all those delays and conflicts for a few precious hours. The myriad of people who made it possible — therapists, guardians, shelter workers, adoption workers, court workers and attorneys — watched from the sidelines, proud like the parents themselves.

The oldest adoptees, 16 and 17, walked beside their parents to the courtrooms where the adoptions would take place. The youngest, not yet a year old, was carried there on the crook of an arm.

Some children clung to their siblings and others raced around the hallway with kids they'd met that morning, already fast friends. Eight-month-old Asher rapped his knuckles on the table attorneys usually sit at as soon as his parents sat him down before the judge. He was ready to begin.

Circuit Judge Kirk Volker obliged. He told Asher's adoptive parents, Heather and Jeff Albert, to raise their right hands. Rows behind them, Asher's 13-year-old sister raised hers, too. Volker signed the adoption paperwork and posed for a photo with the family afterward, all saying in unison: "Forever family!"

That word echoed through the courtrooms all day long: forever.

