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A public adoption is easier than you think

BY CAROL MARBIN MILLER

Beverly Watts, mother, created a family over the Internet.

Unable to have children of her own, Beverly, 50, of Sunrise, was determined to adopt a child. She took classes at Calvary Chapel church in Fort Lauderdale. She got a physical exam. She filled out reams of paperwork and got fingerprinted. And then she scanned a website hosted by Broward County's privately run foster care agency with hopes of finding a son.

Amid about 75 pictures of abused, neglected and abandoned children, Beverly and Walter Watts saw him: a 10-year-old boy, short Afro, sparkling brown eyes, wearing a striped short-sleeve shirt. And that smile. It could fill a room. Or at least a heart.

"We kept blowing his face up," Beverly said. "That golden smile. It just filled me up."

Though the boy had been through so much already -- his father abandoned him, and his mother often left him and six siblings alone in a home that had no food or electricity, and ignored their medical needs -- he seemed so *happy*, Beverly thought.

On April 8, the little boy in the Internet photo became Beverly and Walter's son -- Zachery Lamar Watts -- when a Broward judge finalized the boy's adoption. "I just knew God was at the center of all this," his new mom says. "Directing me and leading me."

Zachery was among about 1,000 children statewide who are eligible to be adopted by qualified families. The children -- who range in age from newborns to late teens -- currently are living in foster homes or shelters. Like all kids, they want to be part of a "forever family."

"It felt like a brand-new life," Zachery says of the day he went to court. "A new mom and dad."

EXPLORE ADOPTION

To help other kids like Zachery find parents, the Department of Children & Families and the state's chief child advocate, Jim Kallinger, have launched a new initiative called "Explore Adoption," which aims to debunk some of the myths surrounding public adoption, and to help find permanent homes for children in state care.

Last year, 3,079 foster kids statewide found permanent homes through adoption, a record number for Florida. Among the finalized adoptions were 349 Miami-Dade and Monroe county children, and another 159 from Broward. The goal of the DCF initiative is to exceed last year's successes.

"There's nothing more important to a child taken from his or her home due to nothing they had done than to have a family," said DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth. "Every child wants a family - a safe, loving family."

"That is what this program does."

Butterworth and other administrators feared that Florida's sagging economy would cripple his agency's ability to find permanent homes for foster children who have been freed for adoption.

Until the last day of Florida's 60-day legislative session, DCF was facing a \$14 million whack to a program that subsidizes adoptive families. In the waning hours, lawmakers agreed to give Gov. Charlie Crist new authority to move money from state trust funds into the adoption and child protection programs -- with approval from the Legislative Budget Commission.

"That was big," Butterworth said of the last-minute amendment. "The whole child welfare system is based on the principle" that children must find safe and permanent homes -- quickly -- either by returning to their birth parents or by finding new families through adoption.

A NEW LIFE

The day Zachery was legally given a new mom and dad, his former caseworker said goodbye to the new family at the Broward County Courthouse. "You guys are a family now," Annabelle Ang, an adoption specialist with Broward's private foster care agency, ChildNet, declared.

Ang remembers thinking: though Beverly Watts had never been pregnant, had never breast-fed an infant, had never stayed up all night with a colicky baby -- she was as much a mother as anyone Ang had met. "I was thinking how this was really such a natural match," Ang said.

Beverly, Ang said, "is a natural-born mother."

Now that he has a permanent home, Zachery can do all the things other kids do, though it will take some penny-pinching: He's never been to Disney World, where the Wattses are planning a summer vacation. He's never seen Hanley Ramirez smash a home run, or Dwyane Wade shoot from the perimeter. He's never been to a restaurant with table cloths.

And though Beverly has attended her extended family's annual Mother's Day celebration every year, things will be different Sunday as she drives to Belle Glade, where her cousin lives, to watch Zachery play in a bounce house, listen to a DJ and eat fried chicken, ribs, collard greens and cole slaw.

For the first time, Beverly will celebrate Mother's Day as a *mother*.

"It feels wonderful," she said. "To put it into words, it's the most beautiful feeling."

Setting the record straight on adoption

Child welfare administrators say many parents are afraid to adopt children from the state, in part because they have received erroneous information about public adoption. Here are the answers to some common questions about adopting foster children:

Q: Isn't it expensive to adopt children?

A: Though a private adoption can cost \$20,000 or more, almost all of the expenses in a public adoption are borne by the state, including court and attorney fees.

Q: How can I afford to raise someone else's child?

A: Parents who adopt children from foster care are eligible for programs designed to ease the financial burden.

Former foster kids qualify for free healthcare until they reach age 18.

They can attend a state university, community college or trade school tuition-free. And parents may receive financial assistance from the state, depending on the severity of their child's needs.

Q: Doesn't it take forever to adopt a foster child?

A: No. The entire adoption process -- including orientation, training, background-screening, home visits and the legal formalities -- can be completed in about nine months.

Q: What if my adopted child's birth parents change their minds? Can I lose a child I've come to love because the adoption falls apart?

A: No. In the state child welfare system, children do not become eligible for adoption until the rights of their birth parents to raise them have been permanently terminated by a judge.

Q: Aren't many of these abused or neglected children hardened, difficult and unruly?

A: Many of the children available for adoption through the state child welfare system have endured very serious trauma in their young lives. Nearly half of all foster children have special needs, meaning they are either developmentally delayed, physically disabled or suffer mental or emotional disabilities.

But these are often the children who have the greatest need for a loving, stable and nurturing home.

That's why, child welfare administrators say, the adoption process focuses so heavily on building trust among prospective parents and the children they wish to adopt -- and in ensuring expectations are realistic for everyone involved.

Through the state, all adoptive parents receive training on the dynamics of abuse and neglect, and they have the opportunity to meet with other adoptive parents to learn what they may experience.

For more information about adopting children from state care, visit www.adoptflorida.org, or a state hotline at 1-(800) 96-ADOPT.

Source: The Florida Department of Children & Families.