



A Child's Journey Home

The Newsletter of the Permanent Families Recruitment Project

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

By Carolyn Smith, MSW,
Project Manager

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It has been two years since Ramsey County was awarded the Adoption Opportunities Grant to plan, implement and evaluate diligent recruitment efforts to increase the number of foster care and adoptive families for our children awaiting adoption. The project is a 5-year collaborative initiative between the federal Office of Family and Children Services: Children's Bureau and Ramsey County Human Services. Our initial efforts have been primarily focused on building the infrastructure to support the grant activities and building partnerships with groups from the African American community to re-

cruit foster and adoptive families. Three years into the project, we will begin focusing on partnering with the Hispanic/Latino community to recruit families. Our efforts are also focusing on finding homes for older youth who have been waiting for many years to find a family. Our newsletter, *A Child's Journey Home*, will be a semi-annual communication tool to keep you informed about our project's significant accomplishments, events, and progress.

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Project Goal:

To provide a permanent family for every waiting child.

TO OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS:

By Karen Franklin, Recruitment Specialist

Community Partnership is a key component of the Permanent Families Recruitment Project. That's why we would like to acknowledge several community partners who have helped us bring public awareness to the broader community. **Rev. James Thomas** of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church in St. Paul hosted a community forum on February 25, 2010 entitled "The Harmful Effects of Children Waiting in the Child Welfare System." In addition, **Rev. Alphonse Reff**, Pastor of Wayman AME in Minneapolis, held an information session on adoption and foster care during the AME Jurisdictional Conference. Assistant **Pastor Mark Lillo** at

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PROJECT TEAM AND WORKGROUPS

Thus far, it has been an exciting and rewarding journey and we want to share with you some of our most significant events and progress, which include partnering with our foster and adoptive families, youth and community members to solicit their feedback regarding their personal experience working with Ramsey County Human Services.



The Project Team Members:
Beverly Bodom, Karen DeYoung, Barry Cohen, Kathy Gilmore, Terri Haselberger, Gayle Kittleson, Carolyn Smith, Clyde Turner, Linda Garrett and Becky Montgomery (Not shown: Cindy Clausen, Karen Franklin, Janine Moore, Laura Phillips, Saba Teshome, Ann Zukoski, and Don Jones, Project Coach)



National Adoption Day

(Our Community Partners, continued from page 1)

SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- Launching Our Project and Diligent Recruitment Media Campaign
- Public Awareness—Defining the Need for a Forever Family
- Third Annual National Adoption Day Event—33 children adopted in a single day
- Completion of our customers satisfaction feedback survey—overall our report card was positive (see article on page 5)
- Formation of our Youth Advisory Group (see article on page 6)

Living Word Christian Center in Brooklyn Park has referred persons interested in adoption to our agency. Also, we would like to thank the **African American Leadership Council; Raymond Boyd** of the Minneapolis-Spokesman Recorder for helping us publish our article, "Why Not Consider Adoption" during National Foster Care Month; and KMOJ, specifically **Ray Seville** and **Walter "Q-Bear" Banks**, for taking time to allow our foster care and adoptive youth voices to be heard over the airwaves.

We need more organizations just like these who are excited about helping our youth in foster care find permanency. If you are interested in partnering with us and finding families for our waiting children, please contact the Permanent Families Recruitment Project at 651.266.4723.

OUR WAITING CHILDREN



Jeremy is a sweet, engaging, polite and helpful

young man. He loves to draw and he's very good at it. He has also enjoyed singing in a Baptist youth choir. Jeremy's favorite foods are pizza, milkshakes, spaghetti, macaroni and cheese, and hamburgers. He has a sweet tooth, too. He likes to watch the History Channel and basketball games, as well as listening to rap music. Jeremy is very talented on a skateboard and has mastered quite a few skills.

If you are interested in any of our waiting children, please call 651-266-KIDS for more information.

Aaron is a healthy young man who can be funny and very helpful. He loves horses and all sorts of animals. Aaron enjoys reading, chess, riding bikes, baseball, basketball, and skateboarding. He also likes to go swimming and fishing. Aaron needs an experienced two-parent family who can be there for him as he moves into adulthood. He is close to his twin sister, paternal aunt and grandmother and would need to continue contact with them following adoption.



Despite waiting a long time for a family he can call his own, Marcus has hope for being adopted. He says, "I don't care where the family lives or how many kids that have as long as I have a family." Marcus enjoys watching sports and recently attended a Twins game. Besides loving sports, Marcus shows his compassionate side when it comes to animals. "I really love working with animals. I like it when I get to go to the humane society and walk the dogs or brush the cats. It's nice and the animals really like it. I feel bad they don't have families and wish I could adopt a dog."



Jessica is a very artistic individual and finds comfort in writing in her journal and drawing. She is a very polite young woman and enjoyable to be

around; she's also very curious about the world around her and will ask some wonderful questions to promote conversation. Jessica enjoys photography and likes any activity that involves being outside. She also enjoys singing and has even talked about auditioning for *American Idol*. Jessica is looking for a forever family home that would embrace her talents and gifts and encourage her in all that she does.

GABRIEL'S STORY

This is my story, but it is also the story of Ramsey County Human Services staff. Without the tireless efforts of their wonderful adoption team, and Karen Franklin, who mentored and supported me every step of the way, I would not have been bestowed the greatest gift of my life—my son Gabriel. They made adoption both painless and pleasant.

At 49 years old, I was a successful, single Christian businesswoman with an active social life and aspirations of a future in politics. I had resigned myself to the fact that I would never become a mother by natural means and was perfectly content with my life as it was. I didn't even want children!

Then in October of 2005, I learned that my brother's estranged wife had given birth to a son who had Cerebral Palsy. I knew that what I wanted most in life was for Cody to come and live with me, despite the fact that I had been told that he was likely deaf and mentally retarded and might never walk or talk. I truly believed that his best chance at life was to be with me, so I embarked on a mission to adopt my newborn nephew, Cody (now renamed Gabriel). Over the next eight months, I attended phone conferences with Ramsey County and they kept me informed about the plans that were deemed appropriate. In May of 2006, I was told that Cody would be

put up for adoption and his birth parents' rights would be terminated. I immediately flew to St. Paul and applied to take him into my home.

In June of 2006, with Karen's assistance, Cody came to visit me for 5 weeks. At nine months old, he weighed 13 pounds and was addicted to Valium. He was unable to hold his head up, sit up or roll over. He couldn't chew or even eat pureed foods. He was still drinking formula! His hands were knotted in fists and he was often in fetal position. His hearing was at 30% with vision issues and developmentally he was 2 months old. He was deemed failure to thrive due to weight, which would require a feeding tube. During those 5 weeks I fell in love with my future son. My saddest moment was when I had to take him back to Minnesota. But I knew then that nothing could keep me from my child.

Every Sunday, I petitioned my church to pray that Cody would come and live with me. It was nearly a year, thousands of tears and prayers, but finally it was a reality. That November, I won the right to raise him as my own and he was delivered to me in Florida. I immediately began a regimen of Holistic care including "baby yoga", natural foods, herbal, nutritional and vitamin supplements, classical music, Sponge Bob, Pooh Bear, Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune, as well as physical and speech therapy.

He was like working with a rag doll. Swallow tests, Shriners'

Hospital and specialists encompassed our days. I hired therapists to come into my home and over the next 18 months, we taught him to drink from a sippy cup, chew, crawl, stand, cough, clap and eat with a spoon.

"Every Sunday, I petitioned my church to pray that Cody would come and live with me."

I barely remember my life before him, nor do I want to. He has been the deciding factor in who I am today: where I was once a self-absorbed, narcissistic business woman, I am now a Mother. My son is my first thought in the morning and my last thought at night. I know that everything that I will ever do from this day forward will be about him. What happens to him means everything to me.

Raising a "special needs" child has not been easy. Most of our days are spent with visits to doctors and therapists, and he has had to deal with so much: from eye surgeries to sedated hearing tests—but he has performed like a champ! He is easily the bravest person I have ever known.

I have met the former President of the United States, I have worked with superstars in the entertainment and

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sports arenas, but nothing surpasses meeting my son for the first time. I thank God everyday for him. I've never loved anyone this way, and if I never do again, I will know that I have experienced the greatest love of all – the love that a mother has for her child.

"Where I was once a self-absorbed, narcissistic business woman, I am now a Mother."

My adoption experience with Minnesota was so positive, that I fully plan on adopting from there again. Gabriel needs a sister because he loves girls.

This is just a small piece of a very important story about how love and commitment can change someone's world. I hope to inspire other mothers and future parents that there is HOPE, no matter what the doctors say. I have watched my son go from a virtual vegetable to a toddling force of nature. He can deconstruct a room in minutes. He is ALL BOY!



CUSTOMER SERVICE SURVEY

On behalf of Ramsey County's Diligent Recruitment Project, Rainbow Research, Inc. conducted a Customer Feedback Survey of people who inquired about and/or sought licenses for adoption or foster care over a 9-month period in 2009. Eighty-four people who had been selected at random were interviewed by telephone concerning their satisfaction at different stages in the process, what they liked or disliked at each stage and suggestions they had for improving it. Overall satisfaction levels with the process were found to be high with no significant differences when comparing: 1) African American with White respondents, and 2) respondents recruited as relatives or kin with respondents recruited from the community at large. A significant majority of respondents felt, for example, that they were treated respectfully by the first person they talked with (95%, n=77); felt that steps in the licensing process were clearly explained in training (96%, N=48); and that the home study was conducted in a respectful manner (100%, N=19).

Although satisfaction levels are high, there are areas in which 25% or more of the respondents expressed their dissatisfaction. Sizeable percentages of respondents, for example, indicated that their calls weren't returned promptly (36%, N=25) and that they weren't told about things in the process they would have to pay for (28%, N=13). Respondents also suggested ways in which the process could be improved as for example, follow-up with applicants throughout the process, provide training more frequently and make staff phone numbers more readily available. Information from the survey, from focus groups with foster and adoptive parents conducted in the spring of 2009, and from recommendations made by national experts at AdoptUsKids, will be used in developing a customer service model and design of training on the model for staff. The survey will be repeated at least once a year to determine areas in which customer service has improved and/or areas in which further improvement is necessary.



Our Youth Advisory Group

YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

One of our most significant accomplishments has been the formation of our first ever Youth Advisory Group (YAG). The importance of involving our youth is thought to be a cornerstone aimed at helping us to improve our policies, practices and service delivery to current and future children and families in our child welfare systems.



Youth Advisory Kickoff Event

Members of YAG and RC staff members planned and held a "kickoff" event to highlight this accomplishment and celebrate our youth. Thirty youth and a host of RC staff, project team members and foster parents attended the event. The youth were able to have their photos taken by two professional photographers who donated their time, equipment and expertise. The use of the facility was also donated. To date, the YAG members have had several speaking engagements in the Twin Cities. As a result, our youth received rave reviews on their ability to "tell their stories." The Youth Advisory Group meets twice monthly with Karen Franklin, the Recruitment Specialist and Scott Price, ALS Social Worker.



OUR YOUTH SPEAK OUT:

My name is James. I entered the foster care system at the age of 5. To date, I have been in 23 different foster care placements, where I have had both negative and positive experiences. While living in foster care, I looked for understanding and guidance from my foster care parents. Ultimately, I desired that my caretakers realize that my birth history and upbringing was not my fault. That's why I'm so glad to be a part of the Ramsey County Youth Advisory Group—this group has given me an opportunity to voice my opinion, share my story to potential adoptive or foster care parents, and to advocate for other youth in the foster care system.



James

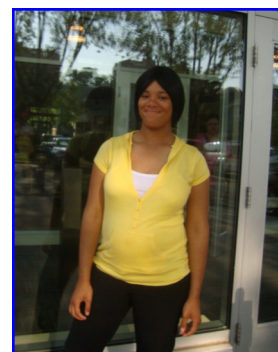


Maria

My name is Maria. I have been in the foster care system since I was about five years old and aged out of the system at the age of 18. My experiences have only made me stronger as a young lady. It is through these experiences that I have chosen to advocate for other youth entering the system or who are already a part of foster care. I really want potential foster care and adoptive parents to know how difficult and how much of a blessing it is to have us in your homes. The key to a successful foster care or adoptive placement is to work with us and to treat us like your own.

My name is Aminah. I have been in long-term foster care since the age of 2½. I have experienced living in 10 different foster homes and have had more than 15 different placements. Foster care is important to me because I believe it saved my life. Unfortunately, my parents struggled with chemical dependency issues and my extended family could not offer me stability.

I have had the chance while growing up to participate in extracurricular activities such as skiing and attending baseball games. I was also able to attend prom and I've received a great education. Where I'm from, I would not have been able to afford any of those things. Due to these experiences, I feel well equipped to pursue my dreams and am well on my way to achieving my full potential.



Aminah

I wish that more people would take advantage of the chance to provide a better life for a child. You have the opportunity to save a child from an unsafe environment by either being a foster or adoptive parent. There are kids and teens of all ages who need foster or adoptive parents to be positive role models in their lives.



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WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Do you know families or individuals considering adoption? Encourage them to contact Ramsey County Permanent Families Recruitment Project at 651-266-KIDS
- Do you go to work, attend a place of worship, or belong to a community organization? Co-host an information session with Ramsey County to help spread the word about Waiting Children and the need for adoptive homes
- Are you willing to open up your home to a child or teen on a part-time basis? Attend training to provide respite or substitute care for foster youth
- Volunteer to be a member of our project team or one of our workgroups
- Do you know someone who works in the media? Help Ramsey County spread the word about the needs of waiting children
- Attend an informational meeting to become a foster or adoptive parent
- Provide gift cards to teens in foster care
- Give informational interviews at your place of business for teens in foster care

