



KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Photo exhibit features kids awaiting adoption

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KALAMAZOO -- A picture is worth a thousand words. A picture can tell an entire story. The photographs in the Michigan Heart Gallery Exhibit feature the faces of some of Michigan's more than 300 children in the foster-care system awaiting a permanent home. Yet some of these stories are heartbreaking.

Billy Ray is 13 and prides himself on being able to take apart "just about anything." Regan is 14 and has her heart set on going to college and becoming a writer. Morris, at age 5, has autism and muscular dystrophy, yet is exceeding expectations.

To look at the smiles in these and other captivating portraits created by professional photographers from across Michigan, one would think these children could happily tell you about their families. But that is when the smiles give way to more quietly stated longings, best expressed by teenager Martha, who says: "I want a family who loves me, is willing to care for me ... a family who wants me to be in their life."

The exhibit, which runs through Dec. 9 at the Kalamazoo Public Library, is a traveling exhibit sponsored by Michigan Heart Gallery in collaboration with Family & Children Services. The Heart Gallery is coordinated by the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange. Some of the library's more than 1,000 resource materials on adoption will be on display during the exhibit. November is National Adoption Awareness Month.

A public reception opens the exhibit from 6 to 8 p.m. Wednesday in the Van Deusen Room.

"Once you see the photographs of the children, it grabs your heart," said Joyce Daly-Spence, of Family & Children Services. "People don't realize how many children are awaiting a family."

The primary goal of the exhibit is to increase awareness of the need for adoptive homes for older children.

"This is not about encouraging someone to look at a child's portrait and say, 'Oh, I want to adopt that one,' believing that love is enough," said Joanne Kraska, director of foster care and adoption with Family & Children Services. "Many of these children have had traumatic experiences or have been born drug- or alcohol-exposed. They need much more than love."

Finding a permanent home can be extremely challenging because the difficult circumstances many of the children have experienced.

Despite all the obstacles, Kraska and Daly-Spence believe that all of the children deserve to have a family.

"These children are in this situation through no fault of their own," Kraska said. "In our society, children are pushed to mature too quickly and (are) exposed to the worst in the exploitative behaviors they see between adults. The more they truly want to be loved and accepted, the more likely they are to act in ways that are difficult to understand."

Daly-Spence stresses the importance of finding families that meet the needs of the children, not the other way around. ``For adoption to be successful, it must be about a family that is willing to change to meet the needs of the child, not about changing the child to fit into the family," she said.

Hope is the primary message of the exhibit, according to Daly-Spence.

``The photographers were amazing," she said. ``The portraits really capture the hearts of these kids. You see their beauty and essence separate from the trauma they've been through."

The stats

v Nationally, 20,000 kids turn 18 and leave the system without a family each year, according to the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.

v In Calhoun and Kalamazoo counties, about 200 children are waiting for a home. Four agencies -- Family & Children Services, Bethany Christian Services, Lutheran Adoption Service and the Department of Human Services in both counties -- provide assistance to children and to prospective adoptive parents.

v Family & Children Services has helped more than 50 children transition into permanent homes since 2003.

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