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## In and out of foster homes, a boy gets his wish

Posted by [Susan Harrison Wolffis](#) December 01, 2007 22:50PM

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Chronicle/Kendra Stanley-Mills

Demari Mathews, 14, receives a big hug from his new mother, Karen Mathews, at the Michael E. Kobza Hall of Justice after his adoption was made official during Michigan Adoption Day on Nov. 20.

Demari Mathews was 11, a child without a home to call his own, when he was ordered into foster care by a Muskegon County probate court judge in 2003.

For the next three years, he lived in a series of foster homes, challenging even the most seasoned foster parents with his behavior and attitude.

"Let's just say, Demari wasn't an easy boy to parent. We knew he was going to need a special fit," said Rosemary Stellino, child welfare supervisor for Muskegon County's Department of Human Services.

By 2006, Demari had exhausted the foster care system and was placed in Child Haven, an emergency shelter in Muskegon for children who are removed from their homes by DHS Protective Services workers -- and from situations like Demari's when children are between foster care placements.



Chronicle/Kendra Stanley-Mills

Demari, 14, sits in Muskegon County Family Court Judge Gregory Pittman's chair after his adoption. Sixteen children were adopted in Pittman's courtroom on Nov. 20, Michigan Adoption Day.

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Although there are 96 licensed foster homes for children in Muskegon County, there is "always a need" for families who will take on "multiple siblings and teenagers, especially belligerent teenagers," she said.

"A lot of people are wary of teenagers," Stellino said.

Undaunted, Demari took matters into his own hands.

Last year, he asked his basketball coach, Vanderbilt "Van" Mathews IV, if he could come live with him.

"He said he was tired of going from foster home to foster home. He asked if my wife and I would be his foster parents," the 47-year-old Mathews said. "I told him I had to talk with the wife ... the key was to convince her it was a good idea."

After careful consideration, the answer was yes.

"We talked to the whole family ... sat everybody down and talked about it because we knew this was going to change all of our lives," said Karen Mathews.

And how.

On Nov. 20, after a year as his foster parents, Van and Karen Mathews officially adopted Demari.

"I love that boy," said Karen Mathews, 45, wiping away a new mother's tears during the adoption proceedings in Muskegon County Family Court Judge Gregory Pittman's courtroom. "He's such a blessing."

Before Demari could come live with them as a foster child, Van and Karen Mathews had to be licensed by the state of Michigan as foster parents. Their home in East Muskegon had to meet certain state requirements. They had to go through special training. And their sons -- Van Mathews V, 21, who attends Muskegon Community College; and Gavin Mathews, 14, a freshman at Muskegon High School -- had to agree there was room for one more in their home.

"Often the most successful matches are with a child's favorite teacher or someone from church or, in this case, a coach," Stellino said. "But what makes Demari's story so unusual is he found his own (foster care) placement."

Add in one more unusual factor. Because Demari is 14, by state law, he had to give the judge his permission to be adopted.

"I'm happy to be placed in their home," Demari told Pittman in court.

"You're in a wonderful place. You couldn't be in a better place," the judge assured the boy. "What's so great is you want them as much as they want you."

The boy and his coach were hardly strangers.

Gavin and Demari had both played for Port City Football League when they were in grade school, and the family was well aware of his talents and his situation. In 2006, they met up again -- but on the basketball court. Van Mathews IV and his son, Van Mathews V, were Demari's coaches in the Next Generation Youth Basketball League, a recreational program in Muskegon County for aspiring basketball players.

"That's my star," said Van Mathews V, who coached Demari's team to a national championship in the American Youth Basketball Tournament last year in Fort Wayne, Ind.

Demari, who wants to be a running back in the National Football League, is an eighth-grader at Steele Middle School. He is on the school's football, basketball and track teams.

"The best part is I know I'm going to stay here," he said. "This is my home."



Chronicle/Kendra Stanley-Mills

Stephanie Seidell, right, occupies her children while waiting for the adoption of three siblings Marcus, 5, left, Benjamin, 9, center, and Jason, 8, during Michigan Adoption Day last Tuesday. Sidell's biological daughter, Taylor, 12, is at left. Stephanie and Tim Seidell also have another biological daughter, Maddie, 10, and an adopted daughter, Gabby, 2.

Van Mathews IV, who teaches math at Timberline Charter Academy in Muskegon, turned out to be more than just an on-court coach to Demari last year.

When he found out that Demari was living at Child Haven and didn't have transportation either to the practices or games, Mathews volunteered to get him there and back.

"The biggest problem I saw (at Child Haven) is that no one wanted to see him ... nobody came to visit him," Mathews said.

It was during one of their rides from practice that Demari asked Mathews if could come live with him.

While at Child Haven, Demari said he dreamed of being "settled down." He yearned for his own room and imagined a family who would come to his football and basketball games -- where he excelled -- and cheer him on to victory and success.

"He liked how we came to all of Gavin's games," Van Mathews said. "Now we do the same for him."

Linda Townsend, the adoption coordinator for Catholic Charities West Michigan -- Lakeshore who handled Demari's adoption, calls it "a match made in heaven."

"Everyone in that family lives and breathes sports," Townsend said. "Their whole life is sports."

On the Sunday afternoon before the adoption proceedings, the entire Mathews family was watching the Detroit Lions game on television before attending afternoon services at Zion Tabernacle Church in downtown Muskegon.

"I told them if I have to go to all those games of theirs, they can go to church," Karen Mathews said.

Going to church twice on Sunday is just one of the rules Demari has had to adopt as his own. Church, doing well in school, choosing friends wisely, following through on things, respecting his elders: Van Mathews said he expects these things from all three of his sons and even his 11-month-old grandson, Van Mathews VI, when it's time.

"I told you: If I fuss at (Van and Gavin) for doin' something, I'm going fuss at you for doin' the same thing," he said.

But that's only the half of it. That sense of being "settled in" that he used to only dream about comes along with the expectations.

"We're here for each other. He has our backs. We have his. That's what a family does," Karen Mathews said.

She has encouraged Demari to continue his relationship with his biological mother and his siblings. Details about Demari's removal from his birth home are protected information. Neither Townsend nor Stellino is allowed to reveal the circumstances, and Demari chose not to share them, either.

"You only have one mother. We don't want anything to get in the way of that," Karen Mathews told him during the Sunday afternoon interview before his adoption was final.

"Now I have two (mothers)," Demari said, looking away from the football game to join in the conversation. "You're my family."

His is a family purely of choice.

"We're all in a learning process," Karen Mathews said. "He's learning. We're learning. We're all learning to be a family."

Pittman, who grew up with Van Mathews IV on Riordan Street in Muskegon Heights, took time out from the adoption ceremony to talk about what their families were like when they kids. Van Mathews IV is one of seven; Karen Mathews, one of eight.

"This is a happy day," Van Mathews IV said after the adoption ceremony was done, papers had been signed and the formalities, taken care of.

True to form, the family was off to basketball practice and bowling leagues that night.

Karen Mathews, who works at MICR Graphics Printing/ Billy the Printer's in Grand Haven, watched her husband and three sons work out who was going where and when they'd be home. She hugged them one after another, extending Demari's embrace a little longer than usual.

"He's our son," she said, still wiping away tears.

She and her husband will keep their foster care license current, even though she doesn't anticipate taking in anymore children.

"But never say never," she said, looking at her family that has grown in size this year. "It's all about love, you know. Love conquers everything."

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