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Adoptive families celebrate new bonds

By ANNE GEGGIS, Staff Writer 



An excited Joslyn Buxman, 4, reacts to the start of adoption proceedings while sitting on dad Dean Buxman's lap Friday. (N-J | David Tucker)



James McAfee Sherman, 12, lower left, smiles as Judge Raul Zambrano sings "Happy Birthday" to him during his and 6-year-old brother Barry Watts Sherman's adoption Friday as parents William and Brenda Sherman look on. (N-J | David Tucker)



Toddler Karly Jane Foley claps with the audience after adoption, as dad Herb Foley smiles. (N-J | David Tucker)

DAYTONA BEACH -- One lost his mother in a car crash. Another brother-sister pair had been through the foster care system twice. And two brothers' parents had simply decided to give them up.

But all 12 children, ranging in age from 2 years to 12, that assembled in the Renaissance Room at the Sunset Harbor Yacht Club had one thing in common after Friday's adoption ceremony: a family to call their own.

After officially adding "Bryant" as his last name, 8-year-old Taylor Allston Shannon Bryan, whose mother died in a car accident, considered what adoption means.

"It means that you are in custody of them and they are in custody of you," he said, gesturing toward David and Stacy Bryant of DeBary. "And ... I don't know."

The proceedings were part of the celebration of National Adoption Day, designed to raise awareness about the need for adoptive families. At least 123,000 children are awaiting adoption in the United States, 560 of them in Florida and 50 in the district comprised of Volusia, Flagler and Putnam counties. But progress is being made.

"This is like Christmas -- the best day of the year -- for people in child welfare," said Mark Jones, chief executive officer of the Community Partnership for Children.

He said that since his agency started working on finding children adoptive homes in 2006, 826 children in those three counties have been placed. Friday's symbolic ceremony brought together the workings of the court system -- including four judges and a court reporter -- into a room full of celebration, complete with Danishes and coffee, overlooking the Halifax River.

Chief Circuit Judge David Walsh recalled when he adopted his first child decades ago and felt an immediate bond with the baby boy.

"I cradled him -- my son -- and now he can cradle me," he said, to a wave of laughter. "This is one of the few times judges enjoy what they are doing."

Evelyn and Herb Foley of Seminole County welcomed their ninth child into the fold Friday -- the third of a three-sibling group from Volusia County. The oldest, Kayla, 6, was adopted after three years with her birth family and is still working through her experiences with that, they said. Two of Kayla's siblings -- including 2-year-old Karly whose adoption became official Friday -- also joined the family.

"We fell in love... and are glad they can stay with us forever," said Herb Foley, who has worked in construction.

The relationship between Carl and Beatriz Connell of Palm Coast and their new arrivals, Thomas, 6, and his older sister, Maria, 7, is just beginning on a smoother path since the children arrived at their home five months ago. But before it was made permanent, Judge Herbert Grimes extracted a few guarantees.

"It also means you're going to be responsible for chores -- keeping your room clean?" Grimes said, before making the official pronouncement.

"I do that already!" Maria insisted.

Carl Connell, who works as a bookkeeper, said welcoming these children into his home has been a challenge. The pair had been in the foster care system twice, had a host of caregivers, and were reluctant to bond -- at first.

"They've come so far," he said. "Now I don't wake up with the apprehension about what's going to happen today. Now, I wake up thinking I'm going to enjoy what the day is going to bring."

And there was excitement about the future that lies ahead.

"I'm sworn into a new family," said 12-year-old James McAfee Sherman, his eyes shining, just after he was pronounced a newly minted Sherman.

He and his brother, Barry Watts Sherman, legally became just as children born to William and Brenda Sherman.

"Is that OK with you?" his new mom, Brenda, 50, of Port Orange asked, smiling.

He replied solemnly, "Yes."