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At the courthouse, families grow

In honor of National Adoption Day, Hillsborough judges finalized more than 50 adoptions Friday.

By ALEXANDRA ZAYAS
Published November 19, 2005



[Times photos: Melissa Lyttle]

From left, Jimmy, 6, Michael, 7, and Jesse, 7, raise their hands as the judge swears in their parents Lorraine Sullivan-Thompson, right, and Ken Thompson, not pictured. Jesse was adopted by Lorraine and Ken five years ago, and he went home Friday with three brothers, including Jon, 3.

TAMPA - There's been no Thanksgiving dinner at Chris and Ray Butler's Brandon home since their 24-year-old son Mark Anthony died in a car accident on Thanksgiving weekend in 2001.

But Thursday, a turkey will return to their table, along with a new addition to their family: Savannah, 2, their adopted daughter.

Savannah was one of 54 Hillsborough County children adopted Friday morning by 41 families at the downtown courthouse in a National Adoption Day ceremony.

Each family had a story. The Butlers' began at Mark Anthony's funeral. Their friends Richard and Linda Covelli recently had become medical foster parents, taking seriously ill kids into their home.

The Butlers began spending time with the Covellis' foster kids as a way to cope with grief. The more they got to know the kids, the easier their decision became. Two years ago, they decided to become medical foster parents as well.

"We felt it was God's will to take our son, and we felt that we needed to give back," said Chris Butler, 47. "We wanted to score some crowns to make it into the kingdom when we die so we can be with our son. We had an emptiness in our heart that we needed to fill."

Savannah, who had been staying with the Covellis, stole their hearts as a sick little baby.



Precious Oliver, 3, has her hands held by new dad Roland Oliver and Judge Katherine Essrig as they pose for a picture after Precious' adoption was approved.



Michael Vincenzo Salvato, 2, grins as he receives a kiss from new grandma Joan Salvato as a judge announces the approval of his adoption. Dr. Michael Salvato, left, is his new dad.

From first glance on Friday, it was impossible to tell that the the rosy-cheeked cutie in patent leather shoes who played at the courthouse had been born premature, weighed just more than 2 pounds and had traces of cocaine in her system.

Savannah stops breathing in her sleep. She has undergone open-heart surgery and surgery to repair her esophagus, and is at high risk for respiratory viruses. She also wants to be a ballerina when she grows up and can say her new full name: Savannah Butler.

"She's a miracle child," said her new mom.

Three medical foster children will also join the Butlers at their table for Thanksgiving this year, including a baby they will welcome into their home Monday.

"We have our son Anthony in our hearts, but when we see these precious children who are in these situations, we want to open our homes and our hearts to them," Chris Butler said.

Michael and Cynthia Laperche had two biological kids when they decided to adopt. After Michael Jr., 11, and Alysha, 8, were born, the Laperches turned to adoption to help their family grow.

"We had a heart for young children, and when we learned how many kids there are that needed a good home, that's what motivated us," Michael Laperche said.

They adopted David, now 2, in February. He came into their home as a foster child when he was 8 days old. At first, Michael Jr. had mixed feelings about the addition to his family.

"I wanted a new brother, but I wasn't really sure if he would play with me at all or anything because he wouldn't think I was his real brother," Michael Jr. said.

These days, David is his shadow. He follows Michael around on a mini version of his Razor scooter.

David's biological sister Hannah, 16 months, was officially added to the Laperche family Friday. After the Laperches took David in, they learned that his birth mother was pregnant with a girl. Cynthia Laperche said that the two biological siblings picked up on their bond at first glance.

"There's a feeling of joy for them that they are able to be together and have each other," she said. "They have their new siblings, but they get a chance to foster that bond they had from the moment they saw each other."

Hannah's new dad is the only one who can style her thick curly brown locks, but Alysha hopes she can do things with Hannah that she can't do with her brothers, like play dress-up.

"I've always wanted a little sister, and now I finally have one," Alysha said.

While the Laperches celebrate the adoption with their first trip to Walt Disney World, Hillsborough Kids Inc., which matches kids with adoptive parents, reports there are about 1,500 children living in out-of-home care due to abuse, neglect or abandonment.

Michael Laperche urges people who can to become foster parents.

"Think of the service you're providing the child," Laperche said. "They may not even know who you are when they grow up, but you'll have really made a difference in their lives."

Alexandra Zayas can be reached at 813 226-3354 or at azayas@sptimes.com

[Last modified November 19, 2005, 01:07:13]