

Adopted Teen Finally Has Place To Hang His Hat



Kevin's bedroom sports the colors of his favorite college team, the Florida Gators. He spent about nine years in foster care before Ron and Melinda Carr adopted him. Now he's a Boy Scout and pet owner.

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TAMPA - Some teens in foster care give up on getting adopted as they near 18.

What's the point now, they figure, when they are about to become a legal adult?

But after nearly nine years in state care, 17-year-old Kevin Carr never lost hope.

"You always need a family," he said one evening in the living room of his new family's home in Valrico.

"Who am I going to go to for help?"

There's Christmas and Thanksgiving to consider. Then, there's the rest of his life.

"I'd be ashamed if my kids grew up without a grandma and a grandpa," Kevin said. "And if my wife didn't have in-laws."

He thought about all of this one day while living in a group home - one of four foster homes he lived in while in state custody - and realized adoption was his best option. His only choice, really.

"It all comes together for me."

Kevin is among 376 children and teens who were adopted this year in Hillsborough County through a private agency that contracts with the Department of Children & Families to handle local foster care and adoptions.

The effort helped catapult DCF's SunCoast Region, which includes Hillsborough, Pasco, Pinellas, Sarasota, DeSoto and Manatee counties, to 692 adoptions for fiscal year 2007.

That's more than any region in the state, and more than double DCF's next-highest region: District 11 of Miami, with 344 adoptions.

Award-Winning Adoption Program

In the past four years, Hillsborough Kids Inc. has made possible the adoptions of more than 1,143 children and teens - a feat recently recognized by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption with a 2007 Angels in Adoption award.

The national organization, based in Washington, D.C., uses the award to raise public awareness about adoptions while recognizing people and agencies that go above and beyond helping children find permanent homes.

U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez, the Orlando Republican, and the Tampa Metropolitan YMCA nominated Hillsborough Kids Inc., which relied on creative thinking and community partnerships to increase its adoptions.

"We're thinking outside the box," said Jeff Rainey, HKI's chief executive officer.

Instead of having caseworkers juggle finding foster homes and smoothing adoptions, HKI devoted one unit solely to adoptions. Camelot Community Care, one of the agencies that contracts with HKI, has 22 workers, all of whom do nothing but connect children with parents, Rainey said.

In the year and a half since the unit began, adoptions jumped from just below 300 to nearly 400, he said.

"I think it's the way to go," Rainey said.

So does DCF Secretary Bob Butterworth, who hopes to replicate HKI's model in other department regions.

"They're doing an excellent job," he said.

The state receives federal money for each adoption. DCF did not respond to questions about how much money it has received and how that money is spent.

There's more work to be done, Rainey acknowledged. Older teens, such as Kevin Carr, are among the hardest to get adopted, he said. There are 78 teens ages 15 to 17 who need a family, he said.

Many times, it's the teens who don't want to make the effort. When they turn 18, they can receive a state stipend that helps support them while they attend school and work at least part-time. They also receive health benefits and other services.

For some, that's enough.

Others are searching for a connection, Rainey said. They want to know what it is to have relatives, to have a real home.

Carr falls into that category. Aside from having a mother and father, a big brother and an older sister, he wanted to join the Boy Scouts, play baseball and have pets.

He wanted what most teens take for granted: a childhood.

He met his adoptive parents, Melinda and Ron Carr, in November 2006 after they saw the teen featured in the Heart Gallery, an exhibit sponsored by the Children's Board of Hillsborough County that showcases adoptable children with professional photographs and personal stories.

The board is a government-funded agency that provides grants for children's services and studies.

Making A Big Decision

The Carrs, with a daughter headed to college and a son to a law enforcement academy in Polk County, were about to become empty-nesters. But their faith, their commitment to community and their desire to give back prompted them to take a leap.

They didn't want to change diapers again, Ron Carr said. A teenager was the way to go. By February, Kevin was staying overnight at the Carrs' home. In June, he became an official member of the family.

He has his own room now. It's blue with a bright orange closet, colors that hint at his favorite college sports team. He sleeps next to a stereo tuned to WFUS-FM 103.5, writes songs and sketches, and loves to read - though he says he doesn't do it well.

He got a driver's permit, something many foster children don't receive until they're adults because foster parents can't always afford the extra insurance. And Kevin, whose nickname is "Bubba," has his eye on a Jeep or a truck - a Chevy, not a Ford.

Outside is a pool. Inside are two dogs that adore Kevin, and two parents who can't believe their good fortune. The teen, who hopes to be a country singer and a carpenter, is grateful, kind and smart.

"He's just a great human being," said Ron Carr, a 57-year-old salesman.

"It's not perfect," added Melinda Carr, 55, a substance abuse coordinator for the Hillsborough County Jail.

"And it's not going to be," Ron said.

But for Kevin, it's pretty close.