

Adoption turns around young girl's life

11/28/2007

By Matthew Engelhardt , Journal Inquirer



Amy Hankard of South Windsor, left, poses with her children, Destany, front right, Amy, back right, and Samantha. (Irena Pastorello / Journal Inquirer)

SOUTH WINDSOR - Destany Hankard was a much different child when she met her adoptive mother two and a half years ago.

The 5-year-old was unable to speak and her social skills were far below the norm for a girl of her age.

Destany was placed in the custody of the Department of Children and Families. Her lack of development concerned doctors and social workers and the girl was diagnosed as autistic.

At the time, Destany was in a preschool program in Hartford's Fred D. Wish Elementary School. It was there that she first met Amy Hankard, a second-grade teacher.

After consulting with her family, Amy became foster mother to Destany, inviting the girl to live in her South Windsor home.

The adjustment took some time. Destany's personality began to emerge, but her world was now completely different.

Her new family noted how independent the girl was, having been forced to fend for herself for so long. Destany could make her own breakfast and always kept her surroundings tidy.

"She was the cleanest 5-year-old I have ever seen," said her stepsister, also named Amy Hankard.

Destany began developing the social skills that she had lacked when she lived with her biological mother in Hartford. She began to speak, and it became clear Destany was not autistic, but rather that her developmental delays were caused by years of neglect.

"It's hard to describe watching a child go from not speaking to where she is now," the older Amy Hankard said. "There are days when you just want to cry."

Before Amy's eyes, Destany became a smart, affectionate, and happy child.

"She just fit right in with my family and everyone fell in love with her," her mom said.

DCF also was delighted with the progress Destany displayed.

"It was an amazing transition in her therapy and everything," said Shannon King, a DCF social worker who handled Destany's adoption.

Despite Destany's improvement, Amy had to consider the long term for both the child and her foster family.

Amy had always thought that if an acceptable adoptive family came along, she would accept the match and give up custody of Destany.

But the family was smitten with Destany, and as potential adoptive parents came forward, none matched the hopes that Amy and her children had for the girl.

Destany's siblings knew Amy would eventually come around and seek full custody. King knew it too, and by last September, the Hankards were before a judge to find out whether the term "foster" would no longer apply to a child who had become a sister, daughter, and granddaughter.

"Amy has been Destany's forever mom from the beginning, even if she didn't know it," King said. "She took care of her every need since day one."

The judge fulfilled their wishes and Amy legally became Destany's mom. The child was overjoyed, and as Amy put it, just about everyone in town was invited to celebrate at a party held at Nomads Adventure Quest in South Windsor.

Now 7, Destany attends Pleasant Valley Elementary School in South Windsor, and Amy said her daughter loves going to school.

Destany proudly goes through photo albums, especially from her adoption party.

Someday, Destany said, she would like to be a "policewoman and own a police dog." For now, she is happy playing board games and mastering the Nintendo Wii, and her family knows Destany never forgets a birthday or important event.

Destany still keeps in contact with her biological mother and siblings. Amy said she wants Destany to always be aware of her past so that when she is old enough, the child can decide for herself where she belongs.

King said Destany was an inspiration to DCF. November is National Adoption Month and Destany's tale is an example of what can happen when a child in need is successfully matched with a loving family.

"Working at DCF can be a very tough job, but kids like Destany and people like her family make it all worthwhile," King said.

According to data provided by King, there were 56 children in the state waiting to be adopted as of September. There were 169 families waiting to adopt.

In fiscal year 2007, which ended July 1, there were 530 adoptions finalized in Connecticut, according to DCF.

Parents must undergo 10 weeks of training to prepare for adoption. It takes three to four months to get licensed, including the training, a home study, and background check.

Adoptive families receive a government subsidy that ranges depending on age and medical needs. There are also health benefits, DCF's supported post secondary education program, and help in cases of emotional and behavioral issues.

For more information on adoption, call 1-888-KID-HERO.