

' . . . IT'S DEFINITELY, DEFINITELY WORTH IT'

For Three Local Families, Adoption Was Way To Go

By { HYPERLINK "javascript:void(0);" },
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TARA MITCHELL WILL NEVER forget the night — not quite a year ago — when the social workers brought the baby Jonathan to her door.

“When I opened the door, and they handed him to me, of course I started crying, and he just came right in my arms and put his head down on my shoulder, and that was it,” she recalled Friday. “We were sunk from there.”

Friday was the day that Tara and Gary Mitchell made 19-month-old Jonathan their own.

In the tiny courtroom of New London's Regional Children's Probate Court on Bank Street, Judge Ronald K. McDaniel Jr. checked through the list of required documents, then said, “The bottom line is, he's your son.”

Tara Mitchell smiled and dabbed at the tears in her eyes.

“Which means,” McDaniel continued, “that you have the right to discipline him when necessary. And you also have the responsibility for raising him and making him an active and productive member of society.”

The Mitchells, of Waterford, were one of three families to appear in that courtroom Friday morning to adopt the children in their care.

It was no ordinary day.

It began with Christine Steliga, the area director for the Norwich office of the state Department of Children and Families, reading a proclamation from the governor.

“Whereas all children need and deserve the love, stability and structure of a permanent family,” it began, and half a dozen whereases later, ended, “Now, therefore, I, M. Jodi Rell, the governor of the state of Connecticut, do hereby proclaim the month of November 2007 as national adoption month ...”

And it ended in an adjoining room festooned with balloons and teddy bears where the families were treated to cake.

According to Steliga, there are currently 57 children available for adoption through the agency, and there is always a need for more adoptive parents. Friday's ceremonies were intended to make people aware of that need.

The agency provides classes to license adoptive parents and tries to link them up with children available for adoption.

The Mitchells were accompanied by their three daughters, Crystal, 12, Angelica, 17, and Kaleigh, 14, and Tara Mitchell's mother, Cynthia Paquet, none of whom could stop grinning.

When Gary Mitchell explained that "we just wanted a boy because we had the girls," his daughters laughed, and Tara Mitchell chimed, "Three strikes and you're out!"

"They wanted a girl, and I wanted a boy," Gary Mitchell said. "I won because I needed backup."

Now, Gary and Tara Mitchell, aged 40 and 36, respectively, say they would like to adopt another boy.

"I think it's important that he has someone that is close to his age ... because the girls are obviously older," Tara Mitchell said. "I think he needs a playmate, a brother, to grow up with."

Jessica and Eric Kessler of Pawcatuck, who were adopting 17-month-old Kyle, have been foster parents for years. Kyle was their second adoption, following a little girl several years ago.

In addition, Eric Kessler, 44, has three daughters of his own, and Jessica, 34, has one, and they currently are foster parents for a 4-year-old boy.

"It's definitely worth it," Jessica Kessler said. "Look what you get. Since he was 3 weeks old, he was placed in our home, so he's ours. How could you not love that face?"

Adoption, she said, is "a very rewarding experience."

"There are ups and there are downs. You're not guaranteed anything, so there are heartbreaks along the way, but definitely when you get that special child, it's definitely, definitely worth it," she said.

For James and Karen Morrison, the voluble 3-year-old Charlie is their first child.

"We found out we couldn't have children naturally," said James Morrison, 41. "It worked out well for us."

For each of the three families, the formal proceedings in the courtroom were surprisingly swift.

The judge decreed the Mitchells' adoption of Jonathan complete in just six minutes, then asked the sisters to bring their new brother up to the bench.

Handing the gavel to Jonathan to make it official, McDaniel said, "I'm always wary of giving a little boy a hammer."

As his sisters held him up, Jonathan Christopher Mitchell banged the gavel down.

There was just one hitch: He wanted to keep it.

“You know,” McDaniel said, “we're going to give you plenty of other gifts, but I want my hammer back.”

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

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