

Heart Gallery features faces of children who need homes DCF exhibit helps place children into loving homes

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It all began with a flier brought home from school.

Mary Morgan was scanning through the contents of her son's backpack when she spotted a letter from the Connecticut Department of Children and Families. It was a letter encouraging families to consider adopting a child. "It really touched me," said Morgan, who lived in New Milford at the time. "I knew I loved my own kids so much. Why wouldn't I love another?"

There was a telephone number: 1-888-KID-HERO. Simple to remember, simple to dial. And she did.

With two boys, Morgan thought she'd like to have a little girl. Her husband and sons were in agreement.

After becoming licensed to adopt, however, she was initially frustrated. "I was waiting"?waiting"?waiting. Nothing was happening."

Many people she'd met through the process had success in adoption through first becoming foster parents. Her case worker didn't recommend that route, as the goal for foster children is eventual reunification with their biological family when conditions are right. Morgan could wind up with a broken heart that way, she was told.

But Morgan didn't heed the warning and changed her licensing to foster care. Children began coming and going almost immediately and did so for several years. Morgan was excited, but always kept in mind their placements were likely temporary.

Then came three little girls: sisters Amanda, 3; Alyssa, 21 months; and Aliya, 1 week old. The girls had a variety of issues stemming from their biological family's situation, but Morgan gave them the same loving home she'd given the others who came before them.

"It was a roller coaster," Morgan said, but everyone persevered. After some time, the girls became available for adoption, and the Morgans couldn't have been happier. Three years from the day they'd first arrived, the Morgans legally adopted them. Today, 2? years later, they're thriving.

"Wow! (Life is) definitely different. I'm not going to get old"? they are keeping me young and active," said Morgan. "Although I can't take credit, they are absolutely the most gorgeous girls. They are happy-go-lucky, caring"?

"It is well worth it," she added. "Ultimately you're bringing more joy into your own life. You think you're just doing it for the kids"? you're doing something good for yourself."

Morgan has been employed at Danbury Hospital for 18 years. This past Monday she was on hand to speak with other potential adoptive parents at the official public reception for the 4th Annual Heart Gallery, a traveling pictorial exhibit representing children in Connecticut who are eagerly awaiting their "forever homes."

Danbury Hospital is where you can see the Heart Gallery, which will run through July 9. It's presented by the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, also known as the DCF. The exhibit was modeled after one initiated in New Mexico in 2001. Social workers there were having difficulty placing older children. Then they had this brainstorm.

Frances Cooke, social work supervisor at Connecticut's DCF Bureau of Adoption, said of the method, "It brings greater success, greater interest. It brings more families in."

The basic premise is that seeing a child's picture will touch you. An easy smile. Something in their eyes. Their spirits are captured by professional photographers who donate their services. The children are eager subjects and have given permission for their pictures to be included in the gallery. New photos are added all the time.

DCF uses many methods for recruiting "forever families" and continues their efforts whether or not the children participate in the Heart Gallery. The goal is to find them permanent, loving homes. "We are always looking," said Cooke.

It's estimated that 500 to 1,000 people walk through the Danbury Hospital hallway where the exhibit is displayed, said Andrea Rynn, community and government relations manager for the hospital. "If we can help, we wanted to loan the facility to do so."

DCF places approximately 500 children per year into adoptive homes, according to Cooke. There are currently about 50 children in state custody for whom DCF is actively recruiting.

Connecticut does not discriminate against potential adoptive parents based on marital status, race, sexual preference, or age. Anyone who can provide a safe, loving home is eligible. Licensing can take up to four months and includes a series of adoption education classes and a home study.

Parents Michael Coon and Brad Ickes know the process well.

Coon had clipped a newspaper ad for a DCF sponsored open house back in 2000, when the couple lived in New Milford. After leaving for a business trip, partner Ickes found it and decided to go.

Other than having had cursory conversations about desiring children someday, the two had not discussed going forward at that time. The ad and the open house opened the dialogue.

"I had a positive feeling from that night," Ickes said. He and Coon both hadn't been sure what a gay couple might expect.

"Connecticut is progressive," Coon said. The couple has friends in other states who have not been as fortunate.

Nine months after becoming licensed, Coon and Ickes received a call from DCF that a brother and sister needed emergency placement.

Nellie, 26 months, and Nathan, 14 months came to them in 2001. Now a family, they gave up their license and embarked on parenthood.

The children also had an older sibling, Eddie. They regularly maintained contact with him, so in 2004 when his adoption placement fell through, there was no question what was next. Coon and Ickes became re-licensed and welcomed him with open arms.

"The most important thing," Coon said, "is that you become secondary to the process. It is more about them. We can adjust"? we are grown-ups."

Coon is clearly proud of his beautiful family. "We laugh"? have great times. We have all grown together."

When asked for advice to potential adoptive parents, both Coon and Ickes had the same sentiment. "Don't lose your humor. Keep laughing. It all works out!"

And Coon went on, "Just do it. It is a total leap of faith. It changes your life"? things you thought were important are not. It is exhausting, rewarding. We are a family. There are no buts about it!"

The Heart Gallery is located between the two tower building elevators in the main lobby of Danbury Hospital and is open to the public at all times. If you are interested in learning more about foster care or adoption in Connecticut, please call 1-888-KID HERO. You may also visit www.heartgalleryct.org to view photographs and biographies of featured children.