

THE MIDDLETOWN PRESS

Adoption finalized in ceremony at family's East Haddam home

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EAST HADDAM — In a touching ceremony Monday afternoon, 2-year-old Elizabeth Daniel became the newest member of a very unique family. In recognition of National Adoption Month, adoptions have been scheduled throughout Connecticut during November. Most are to take place on Nov. 20, National Adoption Day. But after two years of parenting Elizabeth through a long and difficult adoption process, Holly and Nathan Daniel just couldn't wait.

Besides, in a family where adopted offspring outnumber biological ones five to one, November is just another month.

The joy was palpable in the casual-yet-momentous gathering at the Daniels' East Haddam home, secluded at the end of a winding country road surrounded by woods. It's quite different from the home where Elizabeth spent the first days of her life with her biological mother, a young woman from Puerto Rico who lives in Hartford. Connecticut's Department of Children and Families removed Elizabeth after seven days of abuse and neglect.

Judge Anne McKinney presided over what she says is the only adoption in her experience to take place in a private home. Usually, they are held in a probate court, but because the Daniels' many friends and relatives could only fit in their spacious living room, an exception was made.

Judge McKinney began the proceedings with the pronouncement, "Today we are creating a family." She welcomed the guests before turning to the business of listing Elizabeth's new rights, such as inheritance. Then she took on a counseling role, telling the new family what to expect; for instance, she said, children often go through a period of questioning about being adopted. She advised them to create a will, and asked if the parents have any questions.

"It's all good," Nathan Daniel assured her. As McKinney had said earlier, everything is actually resolved before the ceremony.

However, a man in the audience did ask if Elizabeth came with a warranty.

McKinney then prompted Elizabeth, sitting on her father's lap in curly pigtails and a sweater-dress, to stamp the seal on the final documents, making her own adoption official.

“Now I know she’s mine forever,” Holly Daniel tearfully told reporters. “I’ve never thought of her as a foster kid; she was always my kid.”

DCF Program Director Lisa Flowers and social worker Mary Kent were both in attendance, expressing as much pleasure and relief as the new parents themselves.

“This is by far the happiest part of the adoption process,” Flowers said.

She explained that this adoption was especially difficult because it was a “legal risk adoption.” This means that while the Daniels raised Elizabeth in foster care with intent to adopt, the uncertain process of terminating the parental rights of the birth mother and father was underway. If either of them showed enough inclination and ability to become a fit parent, they could take their child back.

Luckily, the birth parents have acknowledged that their daughter’s new home is better for her. The biological parents also had a son, who now lives with his sister at the Daniels. DCF has a policy of keeping siblings together whenever possible. The boy’s name and personal details cannot be disclosed until his adoption is finalized, which is expected to happen in the spring.

The Daniels have maintained a relationship with the birth parents and allowed them to see their daughter, in the spirit of openness that has been a

Daniel family tradition ever since Nathan’s mother, Carol Daniel, adopted the first of her 13

children.

“We were all told from the time we could talk and toddle that we were adopted,” Nathan Daniel said. “It made growing up as a family wonderful because everyone knew they came from a different background, but we loved each other as brother and sister and mother and father.”

Carol Daniel was able to make it out from Kansas City for her granddaughter’s adoption, along with her daughter, Grace. Being adoptee number eight, Grace was the youngest until five more biological siblings were adopted concurrently.

Before a recent move to Kansas City, Carol and her husband raised their clan on a longhorn cattle ranch just outside Austin, Texas. A pair of those long horns hangs in Holly and Nathan’s living room above the flat-screen TV showing photos of Elizabeth.

Carol claims to have become an adoptive matriarch by accident. As a physician specializing in childhood developmental disabilities, she was often called upon to evaluate children who needed placement. One day she kept one for herself. That was the beginning of a landslide.

“I just feel it’s what God wants us to do,” Carol said in a cheerful Texas drawl. Indeed, her religious convictions seem to have played a role. She credits her

church's extensive foster parenting ministry with providing both practical and spiritual support.

The middle Daniel generation (a term that barely applies) spans 30 years, ranging from ages 3 to 33. They include siblings of different ethnicities and developmental challenges. Yet despite pointed questioning, no one was able to recall an instance where adoption was remotely a source of angst. If anything, it was just a joke on outsiders.

"I used to introduce my brother by saying, 'This is my older brother. We're six months apart,' and wait for people to figure it out," laughs Nathan. At 32 years old, he is number two.

Recalling Grace's adoption, Carol Daniel says she was called as a last resort when a new mother decided she couldn't keep her baby but wanted a new family to take her home directly from the hospital. None of the couples waiting to adopt were there, and Carol said, "That must be my baby!"

Children six and seven, who are twins, came into the household because they were recommended for clinical evaluation, but their records were accidentally sent to Carol's home instead of her office. Her husband said yes before anyone could ask.

When asked if they would follow in Carol Daniel's footsteps and perhaps reach the 13-kid mark, Holly and Nathan exchanged a glance.

"We plan to adopt several," he said with a grin.

"But keep it in the single digits," Holly quickly added.

"Adopting is such an important part of our lives," Nathan said. "When we discovered that having children of our own may not be a possibility, it made sense to give back to the community what had been given to me."

This year in Connecticut, 643 adoptions were finalized. Although improvements have been made in both the number and timeliness of adoptions, children still languish in the system. It requires 10 weeks to complete the training course to become an adoptive parent, and about three to four months to be fully approved, including a background check and home-study. Adoptions can take up to two years to be finalized, as was the case for the Daniels.

Holly advises potential foster parents not to be discouraged by the process. "Even though [adoption] can be long and arduous, it gives you the chance to learn and grow with your child."

Anyone interested in learning more about being a foster parent should call 1-888-KID-HERO.