

ADOPTIVE PARENTS FIND SPECIAL NEEDS MEAN LOVE

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

John Bradley is a very outgoing, talkative boy who sings happy birthday at a party, tells about the new Bible that was presented to him at church, and gets excited about dinosaurs.

But, John was not always that way. Just a year ago this six-year old barely talked and seldom walked.

Adoption officials at the Fort Lauderdale office of the Department of Children and Families credit John's remarkable turnaround to his recent adoption by Hallandale Beach residents Mark and Laurie Kramer.

"When we first met John he was very introverted," explained Mark. "It took several visits with him alone before he started talking to us. After just a few visits, he said 'I love you,' and it was obvious that he wanted to stay with us."

"We wanted a child all through our married life, but we weren't able to have one," said Laurie. "At first we wanted to adopt a girl, but some neighbors who are foster parents encouraged us to consider boys."

The Kramer's first met John Bradley last November and took him into their home on March 8. His adoption was finalized on July 19.

John's adoption was just one of 42 adoptions finalized by the Department in Broward County during July and August, compared to 23 finalizations during the same period last year.

"We have made some changes to streamline the process," explained Ed Howell, Adoption Operations Manager for the agency. "We are also in the middle of a big recruitment campaign, and we are able to move more cases through the court."

When Laura first saw John's photo, "it was love at first sight," she said. "I read about his needs and he just melted my heart. There was a chemistry between us and we grew close and bonded."

"The adoption went well," explained Mary Bostick of Dania Beach who is the social worker relating to the Kramers. "I liked the fact that they meshed real well. He reads a lot and they are teachers. It just seemed to fit."

John was born with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a connective-tissue disorder associated with hyperelastic skin, overly flexible joints and fragile blood vessels. The syndrome, along with medical neglect as a baby, affected his development.

The Kramer's took special courses to learn how to care for John's medical condition.

“We do a lot of work with him at home,” explained Laurie, a former teacher. “He works best one on one. John attends Hallandale Elementary School where he mainstreams in a regular class.

“We were both teachers and have been around children all of our lives,” Laurie said. “We knew what to expect.”

While this is the couple’s first child, they said that they were not nervous. “Humor is the answer to being calm,” Laura said.

“Having John is great,” Mark said. “He is like a pal to me. I miss him when he goes to school and wish that he was home. He’s a precious little boy.”

“He even looks like me,” Mark joked.

While the adoption procedure took about six months, which officials said is about normal, Laura said that “at times it felt like an eternity.”

But the frustration with procedures did not discourage them. “We are interested in one more, maybe a girl to keep John company,” said Mark. “We would be willing to take another special needs child.”

Jim McElhannon of the Department’s North Regional Service Center said that the couple would not have to wait as long for a second adoption. “They have already done all of the paper work, it would just take some updating of their files since the family has changed with the adoption of John.”

The Department normally waits for one year before allowing a family to adopt a second child.

“It is often difficult to find homes for children with extreme medical problems,” said McElhannon who lives in Margate. “For one thing, one of the parents generally has to stay home all of the time to take care of the child.”

With the new promotional campaign, Department officials have seen what McElhannon calls an “incredible, unreal” increase in people inquiring about adoption. “We won’t know how many of them work out for another six months until they are approved, but we have 150 new people in the classes,” he reported.

Mark and Laurie are more than pleased with how their adoption went and their new son. “It was all in Jesus’ and God’s timing,” said Mark.

The couple is also very positive about those in the Department who helped them out. “Our case worker was a gem,” Laura said. “Mary (Bostick) took her time on weekends to

meet us when it was necessary. I want to speak positively about them after all of the negative publicity they have received.”

“It was incredible the way it turned out,” affirmed McElhannon. “We need more people to adopt medically complex kids like the Kramer’s did.”

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