

Adoptions are made straight from the Heart Gallery

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her company offices.

Although Angel was not a part of the first round of Heart Gallery children, after the process of her adoption is complete, Brown said she is considering adopting a sibling for her from among this year's Heart Gallery children. NJNG's parent company, New Jersey Resources, is one of the sponsors of the gallery, an online and traveling exhibit of photographs of New Jersey children who are seeking adoption and are typically in foster care.

Heart Gallery of New Jersey co-founder Najlah Feanny Hicks of Clifton said she was inspired to start the program in 2005 when she read an article in Parade magazine about a similar program in New Mexico.

"I had no idea about the extent of the problem," said Hicks, who was working as a freelance photographer at the time. She then contacted the state's Division of Youth and Family Services, which told her, "We have about 350 (kids). Can you photograph them all?"

Soon, Hicks had brought together a group of 150 photojournalists, writers and editors who had worked for newspapers across the state as well as publications including Time and Sports Illustrated to compile a gallery of the 346 children, ranging in age from just under 2 to 17 from across the state, whom DYFS considered its "hardest to adopt."

"First impressions are everything when it comes to making some kind of connection," she said.

Hicks said some of the kids involved in the program have mental or emotional problems, but "most of them are normal kids given an abnormal life."

To date, 126 of nearly 350 kids in the first batch of Heart Gallery subjects have been adopted, and 54 more children are in families where they expect to be adopted but it has not been finalized, said Andy Williams, a spokesman for the state Department of Children and Families.

"The results have been nothing short of stunning," Hicks said.

Describing the photographs of the children in the 2005 exhibit as "phenomenal," Brown said, "A lot of these children have so much pain and anguish, but to pull that amount of energy and smiles out of them, I was blown away by the whole thing."

The gallery, Brown said, "really made it hit home, how many children are out there waiting for a home."

Getting motivated

Brown, a Neptune native who is not married, said she had thought about adopting from time to time, but realized it was something she "needed to do" after seeing a presentation on the gallery at her company's annual stockholders' meeting in January 2006.

"To know that there are so many of them wanting a home and not having it, there was just no more denying it for me," she said.

There are several stages a family has to go through to adopt a child, Hicks said.

According to the Department of Children and Families' Web site, first DYFS will study the family, which will have to become licensed to adopt. The family will go through a period of training, interviews and home visits.

Once the family is matched with a child based on their background and history, pre-placement interviews will be conducted. Once the child is placed, a caseworker will visit the home within two weeks, and DYFS will supervise the adoptive home for at least six months before legal consent for adoption can be issued.

"It can be a lengthy process," Hicks said, "but the beauty is that two years ago there were so many of these children, and every month we see more children being matched up and adopted."

Brown said she first got in touch with DYFS in May 2006 to begin the process of getting licensed for adoption. When the certification processes wrapped up in March 2007 with an inspection of her home by the state Bureau of Licensing, she said she was told it would take about 30 days until she became active in the state's system. It didn't take quite that long.

Four days later, on April 3, Brown received a call at work,



Angel, who is being adopted by Tamara Brown of Eatontown, holds her teddy bear at home. (STAFF PHOTO: MICHAEL SYPNIEWSKI)



SHAREEF
Shareef was born in December 1992. He lights up when describing his basketball skills. A friendly and talkative teen, his interests include video games and music. He deserves a patient, stable and loving family who will provide the structure and nurturing he needs.

(PHOTO: JUAN ARREDONDO)



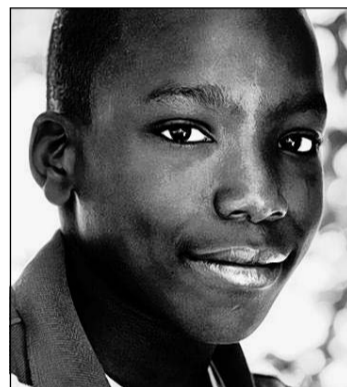
NAHSHEERAH
NahSheerah was born in April 1993. Fun-loving and animated, NahSheerah enjoys music, dressing in pretty clothes, stepping, dancing and track. NahSheerah is a sensitive girl who says, "What I need most is . . . somebody to love me." She is a typical teenager who enjoys getting her hair and nails done and talking on the phone. She is family-oriented, and ongoing visitation with her younger brother is very important to her. She is intelligent and has no problem expressing what is on her mind. She would benefit from a loving, patient family who could guide her into adulthood.

(PHOTO: JAMES ALLEN WALKER)



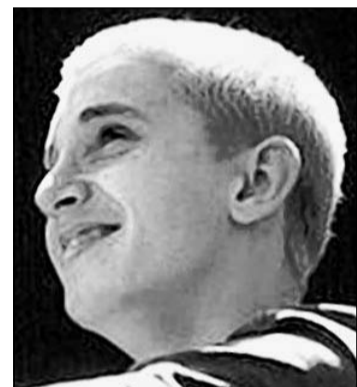
DEMETRIUS
Demetrius was born in April 1994. Like so many of the Heart Gallery children, Demetrius has spent most of his life in foster care, and doesn't reveal himself easily. He sometimes experiences feelings of loss and abandonment. He even uses words like as "irritable" and "picky" when asked to describe himself, but also throws in "nice" and "great self-esteem," and it's those qualities that begin to shine through as you spend more time with him. Demetrius is a bright student and academically on target. A strikingly handsome boy, Demetrius says his favorite animal is the dog, and he would like a career working with animals when he is grown up. School is a mixed bag . . . if he's in a good mood, he likes it. If he hasn't gotten enough sleep, it can be another story. "I still get cranky easily," he says. He likes science "sometimes," but he really likes language arts, and he says he loves to read. "I'm interested in 'Pocahontas,' action books, anything I can get my hands on," Demetrius says. "I love reading." He likes watching Cartoon Network and Animal Planet on TV, and his favorite singer is Beyonce.

(PHOTO: GUZMAN, REPORTER: MATT REILLY)



JAILLAH
Jaillah was born in September 1994. Jaillah says he has been in foster care most of his life. School is "OK, if I'm in the mood," and he says he likes math because it's fun. Jaillah goes to an after-school program, where he can do his homework, and when that's finished there are activities for the kids. He likes to play basketball and football and "sometimes baseball." Otherwise, he likes to ride bikes with his friends, play video games and watch TV, mostly cartoons, comedy shows and movies. Flashing a wide grin, Jaillah says he likes to listen to rap music, like Lil Wayne and The Game, and he even likes to make up his own raps. He's also an artist and thinks he might want to be a graphic designer when he grows up. Although Jaillah and his sister Brianna have been living separately, they need to maintain regular contact with each other.

(PHOTO: KAREN PEARSON, REPORTER: MATT REILLY)



BILLY
Billy was born in June 1991. A couple years ago, Billy appeared on a national television show to discuss a topic the 16-year-old knows all too well — the inequities of adoptions. "Everybody wants to adopt little babies who are so cute and they can squeeze them and everything," said Billy. "People don't realize teenagers need families too. At least with teenagers, you can have a conversation with them." Billy is certainly a teenager capable of conversation. Animated, playful and humorous, Billy likes to chat. He can handle a wide range of topics: movies, Europe, the joys of a swivel chair. Billy would like to go to law school and someday become an attorney who rights wrongs of the world. His happiest moment? Hasn't happened yet, he said. Why should someone adopt a teenager like him? "To show him there are people who care," he said.

(PHOTO: TONY FLOYD, REPORTER: JOE MALINCONICO)

HOW TO HELP

If you are interested in adopting, visit the state Department of Children and Families' Web site or call (800) 99-ADOPT (23678).

- As part of the process, the state Division of Youth and Family Services will study the family, who will have to become licensed to adopt.
- The family will go through a period of training, interviews and home visits.
- Once the family is matched with a child based on their background and history, pre-placement interviews will be conducted.
- Once the child is placed in the home, a caseworker will visit the home within two weeks, and DYFS will supervise the adoptive home for at least six months before legal consent for adoption can be issued.

asking if she would take in a 7-year-old girl who had been the subject of an emergency removal from her current housing situation.

"I had all of 30 seconds to process the information, and basically what it came down to was, 'What have you spent the last year doing?'" Brown said. Once she agreed, Brown was told the child, a girl named Angel, would be arriving at her house at 6:30 that evening.

Describing her situation at the house she lived at for two years before coming to live with Brown, Angel said, "I was in a different home. They didn't treat me right, the way they were supposed to, and that's why they took me here."

Apprehensive at first

When Angel arrived at Brown's home, she was with her brother, Joel, who is a year older and is now living in the northern part of the state.

Although she admitted she "felt a little bit scared" when she first arrived, Angel said she was assured by her brother that it was a nice place to live.

"That very night, she asked if she could call me 'Mom,'" Brown said.

Now an 8-year-old attending third grade at Meadowbrook School in Eatontown, Angel is a friendly and talkative girl who enjoys singing in the church choir at St. Stephen AME Zion Church in Asbury Park, loves music and is proud of her report card.

On a chain around her neck she wears a three-stone ring with a special meaning, Brown said.

"Her past is gone, her present is secure and her future is bright," she explained.

Although she is still legally named Angel Wilson, Brown said Angel prefers to be called Angel Brown.

"She says that Wilson is in her past," Brown explained.

Angel is one of six biological brothers and sisters. Four of Angel's siblings have been placed in homes, and two still live with their natural mother, Brown said.

Brown said she recently received a letter from the state Child Placement Review Board recommending approval for permanent adoption to a judge in the Family Division of state Superior Court. She is awaiting a court date.

For this year's edition of the Heart Gallery, photos have been taken of the 100 children who have been in the DYFS system the longest and are in danger of "aging out."

"Most of these kids have been in foster care for the majority of their lives," and are approaching their 18th birthday, Hicks said, noting that even those who are 17 years old still have "an incredibly desperate desire to be adopted."

Explaining the system, Hicks said, "in New Jersey, they offer some assistance until you're 21, but basically you're an adult when you're 18, so a lot of these kids choose to move out on their own."

The 100 kids awaiting adoption "want the basics," Hicks said. "They want their own bed, their own house, their own parents."

"We hope that our efforts to focus on the '100 Longest Waiting' children and this partnership with the Heart Gallery will inspire families to open their hearts and their homes to these amazing kids," DYFS Director Eileen Crummy said in a written statement. "Too often, child welfare systems across

the nation don't try to find permanent adoptive families for adolescents. But we know that family isn't something that ends when you turn 18 or 21 years old. These children are in need of a forever family to love them, educate them, and support them."

Gallery idea spreading

Recalling her thoughts after seeing this year's collection, Angel said, "I felt upset for those kids, because they weren't happy where they were."

Awareness is crucial to the success of the Heart Gallery, Hicks said, explaining that there were about six galleries across the country in 2005, and that number has now grown to about 50.

"When they know about it, response shoots up," Hicks said. In their first six months, Heart Gallery New Jersey received 25 million hits on its Web site, she said.

"These children are really hidden," she said. "Society just doesn't know that they're there and how many of them are there."

"These children are real, and

they're worthy of being able to have a family," Brown said. "They didn't ask to be in the situations they're in, and they didn't create the situations they're in."

Looking back on her decision to enter into the adoption process, Brown said, "It's the best thing I've ever done, and now I sit back (and ask myself), 'What took you so long?'"

For more information, visit the group's Web site at www.heartgallerynj.org. You can reach the group by mail at P.O. Box 4139, Clifton, NJ 07012, or by phone at (800) 99A-DOPT. For more information on adoption process, visit the web site of the state's Department of Children and Families at www.njadopt.org.

Alex Biese: (732) 643-4255 or abiese@app.com

ON THE WEB: Visit our Web site, www.app.com and click on this story for links to: a photo gallery of Tamara Brown and Angel and the New Jersey Department of Children and Families.

COMING MONDAY

● Beginning Monday, the Asbury Park Press will publish one photo and a short biography from the Heart Gallery of New Jersey every day in hopes of finding adoptive parents for the children. The material can be found on page A3.