

## Extra reason to celebrate

By HEATHER APPEL, HERALD NEWS | 05/11/08 03:01 AM

Nakia Briggs, 33, of Paterson, right, says that when Jamel Briggs, 13, became part of her family, he had seen much in his young life. His maturity, she says, sets an example. At the Calvary Baptist Church, above, portraits of youths awaiting adoption gre (Amy Newman/Herald News)

Nakia Briggs' family has grown faster than most. Within two years, the 33-year-old Paterson resident became a foster mother of three and an adoptive mother of one.

On Thursday, Briggs officially adopted 13-year-old Jamel, giving her an extra reason to celebrate Mother's Day this year.

"It's more serious now, it feels more real," she said Wednesday morning at Calvary Baptist Church, where a photo exhibit has just opened featuring kids around the state awaiting adoption.

Briggs became involved in foster care through Calvary Baptist and her own church, the Christian Fellowship Center, which works with the state's Department of Youth and Family Services to recruit families.

Briggs, who didn't have children of her own, said she saw so many kids that needed homes that it just seemed like the right thing to do. She had helped her sister out with her six kids, including a set of triplets. That convinced her even more that she was ready to be a mom.

"I was 30, I had no children, and I was raised in a home that was not my own," said Briggs. "And there's always been kids at my house who didn't belong there."

Calvary Baptist Church has a contract with the state to recruit and train foster parents. According to Andy Williams, a spokesman for the state's Department of Human Services, as of January, there were 1,295 children statewide in foster care and legally available for adoption.

Briggs is raising these four children on her own and working full time at U.S. Cable, but she has a vast support network.

"I have mega friends and family," she said.

She started out two years ago as a foster mom to a boy who's now 9. He came the same day she received her license to be a foster parent. A few months later, she heard about a boy who wasn't happy at a foster home where he was placed. Soon after, Jamel came into her life.

Jamel is a mellow child who loves basketball and said he wants to be a police officer when he grows up. His adoptive mother said all the children in her extended family look up to him. She described him as thoughtful and patient with his younger cousins, and he has a calming effect on the people around him.

"I've never seen a 13-year-old so mature in my life," she said. "I know that things are OK when he's around."

Early last year, she received a call about a month-old girl born addicted to drugs and agreed to take her in. She learned that the mother was pregnant with another child, and exactly a year later, she agreed to take the girl's newborn brother so the siblings could stay together. She got him at 8 days old.

Foster parents are not taken seriously at times and don't always get the credit they deserve, Briggs said. "People make you feel like you're a glorified baby sitter, but when the babies came, everyone started acting like, 'Wow, you're really a parent now.'"

Later this month, the church will honor Briggs and two other "Caring Families of the Year," said the Rev. Albert Rowe.

Foster parenting has presented challenges. The kids missed a lot of school, Briggs said, and they've been through a lot in their young lives, moving from one home to another and getting caught in battles between their parents and the courts. At one point, she said, she was getting calls from the school every other day, saying that one of the boys wouldn't sit still and focus. Jamel was two years behind in school when he moved in with her, and he's now slowly catching up.

Working with the system can also be a challenge. Although it's been smooth for Briggs, she said there's a lot of pressure for foster parents to meet the requirements established by the state.

"Regular parents are not in the system; they don't have everything together at all times," she said. "As foster parents, you're not afforded the ability to slip."

Last summer, Briggs and Jamel were separated when he was sent to stay with his maternal grandmother in North Carolina.

"He called me that he wanted to come home, and I booked a flight down there that same day," she said. After that, she decided to go through the adoption process.

"I believe that you're called to do what you need to do, because I don't remember not having them," said Briggs. "Everyone has their place in the house."

Reach Heather Appel at 973-569-7113 or [appelh@northjersey.com](mailto:appelh@northjersey.com).