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POST LOCAL

Adoption Day in D.C. creates new families

By Allison Klein, Published: November 17

In the world of foster kids and adoption, babies get scooped up quickly. The decks are more stacked against older children.

With each year that passes, their cheeks become less irresistibly chubby, their emotional wounds become deeper and their chances of getting adopted start to dry up.

That is exactly why Reginald Wilson and Wesley McCammon wanted to adopt “older” children from the child welfare system. On Saturday, they officially became the parents of Reginald, 9, and Regina, 10, during the District’s 26th annual Adoption Day ceremony at D.C. Superior Court.

It was a long journey that started for the couple in their native Mississippi and finished Saturday, when Wilson burst into tears as his family walked to the stage to get the adoption papers signed. D.C. Mayor Vincent C. Gray (D) rose from his chair to comfort a sobbing Wilson, and Magistrate Judge Elizabeth Mullin, who signed the papers, brushed tears from her cheeks.

“I was walking up there, and I was realizing: This was it,” Wilson said, still wiping his eyes after the ceremony in which 34 of the District’s neediest children were adopted.

Wilson and McCammon, who celebrated their 20th anniversary Friday, moved from Mississippi to the Washington area last year so they could expand their family. In Mississippi, same-sex couples cannot adopt.

“We decided to pack up and move to D.C.,” Wilson said. “Our jobs, our house, even the cars we drive, everything was centered around having children.”

The couple, now married and both D.C. public school teachers, know the statistics about older foster children.

More than half of the children adopted from the child welfare system in the District in fiscal 2012 were 5 and under, while about 17 percent were older than 10. According to the American Adoptions Web site, 62 percent of privately adopted children are placed with a family when they are less than a year old.

During Saturday's ceremony, the majority of the kids were pint-size guys with little-man suits or impossibly cute girls with braids, hair bows and tiny, shiny shoes. Most of them were hoisted up by emcee Barbara Harrison, NBC News4 anchor, so the crowd could get a glimpse of them in their fancy clothes.

Some of the children spoke, thanking their parents and the judges. When the tots got to the microphone, they simply said, "Hi," or "I like to eat pizza."

They were the lucky ones. There are still an additional 138 children in the District who are awaiting adoption, more than half of them 13 and older and many bouncing among foster homes.

"The older kids get, some kids may lose hope," said Mindy Good, spokeswoman for the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency. "In general, the older a child is, the more difficult to find a permanent home for them."

When children turn 14 in the District, they can decide that they've had enough disappointment, that they don't want to be eligible for adoption.

Wilson, 41, and McCammon, 40, have known for years that they wanted to adopt.

In Mississippi, they took in foreign-exchange students and, after seven years of hosting various children, decided it was time to have kids of their own. They loved their annual sightseeing trips to Washington and learned they could adopt here, so they uprooted their lives and took a leap of faith.

Because they are teachers, they wanted school-aged children so they would have the same schedule.

Wilson said he did not feel comfortable talking about his children's lives before they were with him but said they are now thriving. They had been in foster care for seven years.

"You do the math," he said.

Reginald and Regina, who are biological siblings, have been living with Wilson and McCammon in their Gaithersburg home since April.

The couple met their children in March at a dinner at which the children did not know they were meeting prospective parents. The bond was immediate, Wilson said. The kids grabbed their future parents' hands and led them around Chuck E. Cheese's, playing and laughing for hours.

"Within 10 minutes of meeting them, we were like, 'Let's do it,' " McCammon said.

They said the past few months have been a dizzying ride of ballet, violin, karate, family dinners, homework and, at little Reginald's insistence, making sure his clothes match Wilson's.

The kids even changed their names to resemble Wilson's.

"If I have a plaid shirt with blue, little Reggie has to have a plaid shirt with blue," Wilson said. "One day, I was wearing pink socks, and he looked at them and said 'Hmm, pink socks.' And I knew what that meant: I had to go buy him pink socks."

Wilson joked that one challenge has been his daughter's hair. Every Sunday, he said, he presses and braids it for two hours.

"Her hair is the bane of my existence," he laughed. "But I have four sisters — I'm good at doing it. If that's what it takes to make her happy, I'm going to do it."

He said adopting the children has been challenging and exhausting but such an overwhelmingly happy experience that he wants to tell the world.

"There are problems that can arise just as there would be with biological children," Wilson said. "If there are people out there who want to do it but are scared, I'm here to tell you it can be done. You can make a difference. Every child deserves a loving home."

Regina and Reginald now have one. When it was their turn to have their adoption papers signed, Regina walked to the microphone and looked at her dads.

"I'm happy I have them because I'm appreciated," she said. "And I hope I live with them forever."