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Adoptions finalized during annual Adoption Day celebration in the District

By Luz Lazo, Published: November 23

Dalontae Wilkinson knows he wants to go to college in California. One day, he said, he will be an actor, or maybe he will be a police officer. He also envisions himself volunteering to care for the elderly and disabled.

The 15-year-old has many dreams that he said he is more likely to realize now that he has a family.

Dalontae was adopted after 10 years in the foster-care system. He lived in several homes, wasn't doing well in school and almost gave up hope of finding a family.

"It is a very big day for me," the tall boy, dressed in a suit and tie, told a crowd in the third-floor atrium of the District's Moultrie Courthouse Saturday morning. "This is my father," he said, proudly extending his arm around Kevin Wilkinson.

It was a big day for the 21 Washington area families at the 27th annual Adoption Day celebration in the District. With 29 adoptions finalized, the courthouse turned into a joyous party. There were tears, hugs, flower bouquets, colorful balloons and gifts. The children took to the stage to speak about finding love.

"I am glad I have a family that loves me and cares for me," Dalontae said.

Similar celebrations took place across the country as part of National Adoption Day, an event held every year on the Saturday before Thanksgiving that brings judges, public officials, families and the child welfare system together to raise awareness of the many children in foster care waiting to be adopted. The National Adoption Day Coalition estimates that 4,500 adoptions were finalized this year at nearly 400 events across the country.

Nearly 400,000 children are in foster care in the United States, and of those, about 100,000 are waiting to be adopted, according to the U.S. Administration for Children and Families.

"These saddest of statistics in our country give us all the more reason to be thankful for what these parents are doing today," said District Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D), who greeted parents and children at Saturday's event. These families, she said, "are giving their children a very priceless gift. Thank you for that gift."

In the District, home to 2,797 children in the welfare system, city officials say they are looking for parents for 123 children. A majority of those children are older than 11 and will be more difficult to place before they age out of the system, said Mindy Good of D.C. Child and Family Services.

“We have wonderful young people in the system who, when they talk about their aspirations, your heart just opens up,” Good said. “Some of the older kids have given up hope. These are kids who thought nobody would care for them.”

Two years ago, Dalontae was one of them. But he met Wilkinson, 38, who lives in Clinton and works for the District’s public school system as a counselor. Wilkinson tutored the boy once a week, then became his foster parent until the adoption was completed.

Although the process can be long and difficult, new parents say it’s worth it for the joy they feel when it’s finished.

“It is so great to see them run and do things that traditional kids do. Every day feels like a bit of a great event,” said Charles DeSantis, 44, who with his husband, David McDermott, adopted two boys.

When the boys arrived in their Northwest home in June 2012, they needed extra care. Lucas, now 5, was in a special school because of his cerebral palsy and couldn’t walk or talk. Andre, 3, weighed just 19 pounds. Now, Lucas is in regular school and runs around like any other boy his age. On Saturday, the brothers held tight to their parents’ hands, wearing matching navy-blue sweatshirts, as they walked on stage for their ceremonial adoption presentation. DeSantis and McDermott, who got married this year, are in the process of adopting toddler twin girls.

“It doesn’t matter that they are not your biological children, they are yours,” said DeSantis, a school administrator in the District. “People really think that when you adopt from the system, you are doing something good. But in our case, we are so lucky. If it wasn’t for adoption, we wouldn’t be able to have kids.”