

## 2 Adoptive Families Will Help Siblings On Path to Bonding

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Jewel Dews, 9, and her two younger brothers have been given the opportunity to re-discover the family life they almost lost.

They have been living apart for years, caught up in the foster care system with little prospect of being together. Now, thanks to two adoptive Maryland couples who live about 20 minutes apart, Jewel and her brothers, Jamahl, 5, and Jamil, 4, will have the chance to keep their bond strong.

Yesterday, in the sun-drenched atrium of D.C. Superior Court, Jewel was adopted by Darlene and Winston White. Her brothers were holding hands with Susan and Randall Neal, who adopted them two years ago.

"One of the greatest gifts you can give another person is of yourself," Susan Neal said. "For us, we knew these kids came from pretty sour backgrounds and they had a lot of trauma and a lot of loss issues. We knew we could do



BY LINDA DAVIDSON — THE WASHINGTON POST

At D.C. Superior Court, a family circle grows. From top left are Elijah Neal, Sadé Neal, adoptive parents Randall and Susan Neal, Judge Ronna Lee Beck, and Darlene and Winston White. Below, Jamil and Jamahl Neal with sister Jewel Dews, whom the Whites adopted, and the Whites' foster daughter, Lucy.

# Ceremony Cements 48 Children's New Lives

ADOPT, From C1

better than that."

Both families have made the commitment to keep the children close. Jewel has been to the Neals's Camp Springs home for a sleepover, and both the Neals and the Whites, who live in Landover Hills, expect to come together for birthdays and other family occasions.

Jewel and 47 other children were adopted by 31 families at the 20th annual Adoption Day ceremony, held at the courthouse.

For the Whites, it was the culmination of a five-year process. Darlene White said yesterday that she was nervous before the adoption ceremony but relieved.

After living with the Whites for more than a year, Jewel returned to her biological mother for a few months.

"Oh boy, did I miss her," White recalled. She told the caseworker

that if Jewel ever needed a home again, she wanted the first opportunity to welcome her.

She was thrilled when Jewel returned.

The mood was joyous at the courthouse, which on most days is filled with frenzied lawyers and anxious clients. The hallways were bustling with little girls in velvet dresses, little boys in suits, colorful balloons and the sounds of Deaf Dog and the Indictments, a Blues Brothers-type band fronted by William Jackson, deputy presiding judge of Family Court.

Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.), an adoptive mother, gave the keynote address, and Mayor-elect Adrian M. Fenty (D) offered brief remarks.

Recognized at the event was Evelyn Andrews, who coordinated the first Adoption Day at Superior Court in 1986. Andrews, who was chief of the city's adoption and placement resources branch at the time, recalls there being fewer than 10 children and only three judges at the first ceremony.

"To see all this growth is just tremendous," Andrews said. "I am honored to have played such a small part."

Since the first ceremony at Superior Court, 3,511 children have found a family. More than half of those adoptions — about 2,000 — have occurred

in the past five years. Jewel was among 244 children adopted this year, about three-quarters coming from foster care.

"I think there's an increased effort and focus on children not languishing in foster care and getting placed into permanent families," said Uma Ahluwalia, interim director of the agency.

Ahluwalia said that in 2004, the agency was honored by the federal government for its adoption successes.

"This is the most hopeful part of our work," said Ahluwalia, looking out at a crowd of children and beaming parents.

At 21, Yvette Smith was the oldest person adopted yesterday. She strode to the podium with her siblings and parents, Stephen and Nancy Smith, who have cared for Yvette since she was 10. Yvette couldn't resist giving a big hug to McGruff the Crime Dog, who handed out stuffed animals to the adopted children.

Also at the ceremony was Barbara Harrison, a news anchor at WRC (Channel 4) and host of the broadcast's "Wednesday's Child" segment, which highlights children seeking homes. Two of the children who were featured were adopted yesterday.

Like many foster parents, Susan and Randall Neal said they welcomed their foster children with few long-term expectations at first.

They have two other adopted children, Elijah, 15, and Sadé, 16. Susan Neal recalled meeting Elijah for the first time in 1995.

"He looked up at me and said, 'I like your hair.' I said to him, 'We're going to do just fine. Let's go.'"

Many children enter foster care with hopes of reuniting with biological parents.

Elijah, for example, had planned to be reunited with his biological mother, but circumstances changed his plans to adoption. And the Neals altered their plans, too.

"Once you figure out you can do it, then it's not hard to make the decision to go from fostering to adoption," Susan Neal said.

The Whites also have a foster

## Want to Help?

There are 315 children in the District who are seeking adoption, according to the city's Child and Family Services Agency. People interested in adopting may call 202-671-LOVE for details.

child, Lucy Flemings, 8, who attended.

Darlene White said that Jewel loves to visit the Neals and spend time with her brothers.

"She was asking 'When can I go again?'" White said. "We're going to continue that for sure."



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At the 20th annual Adoption Day ceremony, Stephen Harden of Upper Marlboro hugs his twins, Mia, left, and Nia, who are 3.