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THE DISTRICT

For Teen's Adoption Dream, It's Never Too Late

By [Petula Dvorak](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer
 Saturday, November 15, 2008; Page B03

At home, in the minivan, at the dinner table, Damien Harris was badgering Marseeda Reed for something he badly wanted before his 18th birthday. It wasn't an ordinary teenage desire, like a new phone, an [iPod](#) or a car, even.

He wanted to be adopted.

Three weeks before he legally became an adult, his foster mother granted him that wish, something exceedingly rare for a 17-year-old foster child. They celebrated with strawberry shortcake, Damien's favorite.

Of the 2,300 children in the District's foster home system, about 800 are, like Damien, "legacy kids" -- teenagers who have been in the system for years and are, for all practical purposes, unlikely to be adopted. Their future is to stay in foster care until they can walk away as adults, [Roque Gerald](#), the Child and Family Services Agency director, said in a recent symposium about the state of the agency.

Damien didn't want that. "I'm not ready to be on my own," he said. After five years of pestering, doggedly doing his chores and boring his way deep into Reed's heart, Damien legally became her child.

"I just really wanted a family, my own family," said Damien, who likes to point out that he is now "Damien Harris dash, don't forget the dash, Reed."

Today, 16 children will also get that wish amid an unusual amount of fanfare because it is National Adoption Day. In the District, judges hope the day will highlight the 289 children eligible for adoption this year.

"There are kids sitting in foster care who really have no idea about whether they will be reunited with their own families or if they will have a permanent family," said [D.C. Superior Court](#) Judge Anita Josey-Herring, who



Marseeda Reed and her adopted son Damien Harris-Reed, 18, who came to the family six years ago as a foster child and was officially adopted when he was 17 years old. (Lois Raimondo - Washington Post)

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has presided over the celebratory adoption days for eight years. "It's just critical for people to know these kids are out there."

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Damien was set on the path to a permanent family six years ago, when he and his five siblings were taken from their mother and placed into foster care.

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"She couldn't take care of us," Damien said. He didn't like his first foster home, which he shared with another boy who Damien said constantly beat up on him. He met Reed while on a weekend respite: She was offering her home as a foster parent on weekends. Damien clicked with Reed's sons -- one biological, one adopted. They went to a Redskins kids' event, and Damien didn't want to go back to his foster home.

Reed thought Damien was sweet. He has a learning disability and doctors told Reed that even though he was 13, he was more likely to relate to boys

about 7 or 8 years old, the ages of Reed's sons.

So eventually, the family grew, even more when Reed gave birth to a girl and when two of Damien's younger siblings, who are still Reed's foster children, arrived.

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Page 2 of 2 < [Back](#)

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Reed, 42 and a photo technician, said she grew up in a large family and knew she wanted one in her [Prince George's County](#) home.

It wasn't an easy road.

The foster kids were scarred from years of neglect and the uncertainty of bouncing around foster care.

"They were hoarders. I used to find chicken bones in bathroom drawers and food tucked away everywhere," said Reed, who buys huge boxes of food from [Costco](#) to assure them that groceries are abundant.

The first time she adopted, it was a more typical arrangement. The boy was just a year old, a babbling, fat and happy baby and one of 285 adopted in the District that year, according to the Child and Family Services Agency. There were 387 children adopted in 2004, 314 in 2005, 182 in 2006, 155 in 2007 and 112 this year.

"A few years ago, children were coming in for adoptions typically as babies or infants and kids within the age range of 6 to 9," Josey-Herring said. "Over the last couple of years, we see kids who are coming in as teenagers. They have been living in circumstances that are not safe for a very long period of time."

The babies are quickly adopted, but the number of older foster children is still high, Judy Meltzer said in a report she issued as the court-appointed monitor of the Child and Family Services Agency.

There is "an extraordinarily high number of children in CFSA's custody who are assigned a permanency goal of Another Planned Living Arrangement," which means they will simply "age out" of the system, Meltzer wrote in a September letter to the court.

And because of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, enacted



Marseeda Reed and her adopted son Damien Harris-Reed, 18, who came to the family six years ago as a foster child and was officially adopted when he was 17 years old. (Lois Raimondo - Washington Post)

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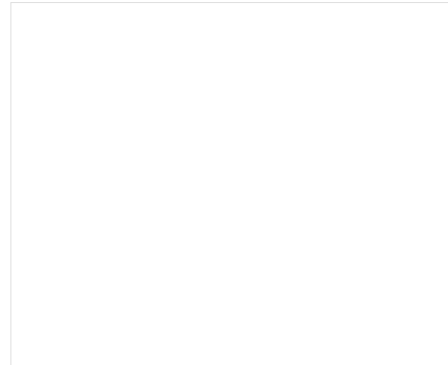
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last month, families will receive monthly adoption incentives as high as \$800 for foster children such as Damien, who have special needs and are part of a sibling group, and families will continue to receive the payments until the children turn 21.

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"If you think about it, when most of us graduated and went to college, we were still calling our parents when our cars broke down, we overspent or we just needed somebody who would hold our confidence," Josey-Herring said. "Kids need adults in their lives that are going to be there for them, even as they turn 18."

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