

The Washington Post

D.C. to Celebrate Happy Endings on the Road to Adoption

November 22, 2003

By Arthur Santana

Joann Lewis was astonished when she first met the sickly 3-year-old boy, who weighed about 10 pounds and could hardly lift his head, let alone talk. Social workers described Rickey Thomas as a "medically fragile child" in need of a foster home. Mentally retarded, he also has cerebral palsy, and for a while his life was touch-and-go. Then, a nurse placed Rickey into Lewis's arms at the Hospital for Sick Children, and she was once again taken aback. He put her right index finger into his mouth and bit down to the bone. No one that day thought Lewis, who was considering becoming Rickey's foster parent, would ever return. But drawn by a desire to help a child who she feared would languish in a hospital bed, Lewis did come back. Now, six years after signing on as Rickey's foster parent, she is taking another big step. Today, she will adopt the boy. Rickey is scheduled to be one of about 40 children featured in a ceremony today at D.C. Superior Court, marking its 17th annual Adoption Day. On National Adoption Day, more than 100 communities across the nation will join with the District in finalizing the adoptions of 2,500 children. Lewis, a 59-year-old mother of three grown sons, from Upper Marlboro, said she couldn't imagine her life without Rickey, adding, "he has always been a member of the family, from the first day." With Lewis's help, Rickey, now 9, has made remarkable progress. He talks, is able to walk with a walker, and is up to nearly 50 pounds. At his home on Thursday, Rickey did not seem to fully understand what will happen at the ceremony, but he sensed that it's important. "Are they going to take my picture?" he asked with a high-pitched, lilting voice. The District event, sponsored by the court and the city's Child and Family Services Agency, celebrates the adoption process with speeches, songs and the signing of adoption decrees. Officials say they hope it encourages other families to consider adopting children or becoming foster parents. The public is invited to the 10 a.m. event, which will feature screenwriter Antwone Fisher, who wrote a movie about his difficult upbringing in foster care. The courthouse at 500 Indiana Avenue N.W. will be transformed into a virtual playhouse from 10 a.m. to noon, with a police band, a clown and face-painting. Officials said the need for more adoptive parents is great: Across the nation, nearly one-fourth of the 542,000 children who were in foster care in 2001 are waiting to be adopted, according to federal government statistics. These children are usually not the infants that many potential adoptive parents envision. They tend to be older, minority children, and most have been in the foster care system for more than three years, federal officials say. Many have special needs, such as a history of maltreatment or physical, mental or learning disabilities. In the past seven years, adoptions in the District have nearly tripled, from 113 in fiscal 1996 to 315 in fiscal 2003, said Mindy Good, a spokeswoman for the family services agency. At any given time, about 900 children, most between 6 and 17 years of age, are waiting to be adopted, she said. Of the 900, about 500 are in pre-adoptive placement, she said. Rickey weighed one pound when he was born prematurely, at 6 1/2 months. His birth mother soon decided that she could not care for him. His father also was unable to do so, but he has stayed in touch and plans to be at today's ceremony. The boy's road to a permanent home started after Lewis found an ad in a Penny Saver mailer seeking mentors for children with special needs. "I just felt like I wanted to do something with my life that was going to help someone else," she said. When Rickey came home with Lewis

about three months after their introduction, it was as if he had entered a new world. Everything -- carpeting, dogs, trees and cars -- was new. When Lewis took the delicate boy to the park, he was wary about the new surroundings, curling himself up in a ball. "When he touched a tree or a leaf, it was a foreign thing to him," she said. And for a year, he never spoke.

Now Rickey can hardly stay quiet. Whenever Lewis speaks, Rickey chimes in. "Excuse me," he says sheepishly, tugging at her shirt. "Excuuuse me." He is apt to bellow out "Hallelujah!" at any given time, at church, in school, at home -- whenever the mood hits. With legs still as frail as twigs, Rickey doesn't so much crawl as hops when not using his walker. He is perpetually curious, suddenly excited around new visitors and quick to offer a "cheese!" and an infectious smile when confronted with a camera. He is a boy, Lewis said, who won her over with his pure heart. He loves singing gospel music and pounding on his tambourine. He enjoys the harmonic sound his electronic keyboard makes. He has extra-sensitive hearing, she says, allowing him to hear the most faraway and quiet sounds. Lewis no longer works so that she can devote her full attention to Rickey. She gets \$26,000 a year from the District government, via the MENTOR Network, based in Baltimore, to help with his care. Divorced, she lives with one of her sons and his wife. She's having a new room built for Rickey that can more easily accommodate him. "Do you know what it means that you're going to be adopted?" Lewis asked Rickey the other day. "I have no idea," the smiling boy replied softly. Then he suddenly grew excited. "Does it mean you're going to take my picture?"

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