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The ruling she's been waiting for

At Adoption Day ceremony, D.C. Superior Court judge is among those celebrating official parenthood

BY BRIGID SCHULTE

On Saturday, everything and nothing changed for Kimberley Knowles and the squirming 2-year-old boy on her lap. He was delivered to her by social workers as a feverish 3-month-old who'd been abandoned by his parents, landing on her doorstep Dec. 29, 2008, with only the pants and top he was wearing and one extra diaper. On Saturday, he became her son.

"On the one hand, nothing feels different. I know we're going to wake up tomorrow and do the same things we always do," Knowles said. "But after all the pomp and circumstance today, I know that it is different."

Knowles and her now-legal son were one of 18 new families legally created during a ceremony at the District's Superior Court on Adoption Day, a nationwide event to both celebrate adoption of all kinds — private, international or from the foster care system — and highlight the need to find permanent homes and a second chance for abandoned children. More than 160 children in the District's

foster care system are waiting to be adopted.

Knowles, 40, also became the 13th judge in the D.C. court system to become an adoptive parent. She is a Superior Court magistrate judge.

For 10 years, Knowles worked as a prosecutor in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia, prosecuting the kinds of cases that leave a hollowness in the gut and an ache in the heart. Sexual abuse. Neglected children. The toddler so badly beaten at 18 months that he will be lucky to ever learn to dress himself.

"I saw a lot of abused kids, horribly abused by their parents. I saw kids abused by foster parents who were only in it for the check," she said. "For me, if you could hurt a child, I had no problem prosecuting you. And when I met the kids, I could show them there was a better way."

At the same time, Knowles, who had always wanted to be a mother, realized she wasn't getting any younger. With her "significant other" in New York with children of his own and no desire for more, Knowles first considered a private adop-

ADOPTION CONTINUED ON C4



ASTRID RIECKEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

At D.C. Superior Court, Knowles's brother, Nigel, holds his new nephew as Knowles, right, and other family members and friends mark the adoption.



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Thomas McRae, 17, who was adopted by the mother of his best friend, wipes away tears.

A 'forever' day for adoptees

ADOPTION FROM C1

tion. "But after all I had seen, I knew there was just such a need, so I decided to try foster care."

She took the 30-hour course to get her license. She bought a crib, diapers, formula, and — knowing a child in crisis could arrive at a moment's notice — began methodically searching out day-care centers.

Almost two years ago, when she got the call at noon that she would have a foster child by 6 p.m., she was ready.

Three days later, when the baby came down with a virus, she rocked him through the night. It was at that moment that she knew she wanted him forever.

She read all the baby books. She watched for developmental milestones. She diligently compiled lists of questions to ask the pediatrician. Her tidy rowhouse in Michigan Park was soon bursting with bright plastic toys, Sesame Street books and stuffed animals. She learned to love "Blue's Clues." She changed her life. "Your priorities change with a child," she said. "And he became my first priority."

Still, Knowles knew that the boy wasn't hers. "I tried to keep in mind that he could go back to his parents if the court deemed it best," Knowles said. "But I can't lie and say I didn't hope it would be a permanent thing."

The boy would spend weekends with his biological grandmother,

who cares for the child's older brother.

"I found myself literally counting the hours until he came back," Knowles said. "It was so depressing without him here." She also arranged for sibling visits with his younger brother, who is in foster care.

Over time, Knowles and the boy's grandmother became friends. One day, she said, the grandmother told her: "As long as I can keep seeing him, I don't have a problem with you keeping him." Knowles felt a weight lift. At 18 months, the boy began calling her "Mama." She began calling him "Baby Love."

Last November, she petitioned the court to adopt the boy. After a two-day trial in September, the court agreed. The arrangement was formalized on Saturday. Knowles requested that the child's first name not appear in print so that the biological parents, who are still "in a fog," won't be able to search the Internet for his name in the future.

D.C. Family Court Judge Juliet McKenna signed Knowles's adoption papers. McKenna herself adopted her foster daughter, a girl named Miracle, in 2002. "It's hard for so many of us in the system, judges, attorneys, social workers, who've handled these types of cases and seen the difference it makes to kids to have a permanent, stable home," she said. "That's what happened to me."

Each of the 22 children had stories to tell. Thomas McRae's was dramatic. McRae is 17. He'd been taken from his biological mother as a 1-month-old infant and for a decade was shuttled among homes of acquaintances of the man he thought was his father.

At 11, McRae was asleep on a couch when a shotgun blast through the wall left pellets in his spinal cord. "That was the best day of his life — it got him into foster care," said his lawyer, Karen Thiel. "Best day, until today."

When he was in sixth grade, McRae met Dawson Hylton, and the two became best friends. When Hylton discovered that McRae was in foster care, he asked his mother, Joi Morris, if they could adopt him. She said yes.

"We just always had that kind of special connection. We've always felt like brothers," Hylton said, touching his heart with his fist. "Today just makes it official."

When it came time for Kimberley Knowles to stand before the judge, she carried the 2-year-old boy in her arms.

Nearly 25 of Knowles's relatives and friends from the U.S. Attorney's office cheered. One waved a sign saying the child "Is Officially Ours!"

When the boy heard his new name, he shouted, "That's me!"

"Yes, that's you," his mother said, pressing her lips to his cheek. "You're a Knowles now."

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