

The following content was made possible by the generous sponsorship support of The Minneapolis Foundation.

## **A happy ending: Ramsey County project helps children find adoptive families**



Courtesy of Jennifer and Scott Saxe  
17-year-old Ashley Ankeny, center, surrounded by Jennifer and Scott Saxe,  
and their biological children Walter and Katherine

**By Cynthia Boyd | Friday, Nov. 19, 2010**

Seventeen-year-old Ashley Ankeny has been waiting most of her life for a family to call her own. Her wish comes true Saturday when the people she calls "my dream family" adopt her.

In a courtroom at the Ramsey County Juvenile and Family Justice Center in St. Paul, a judge will finalize Ashley's adoption and that of nine other children to three other families from Ramsey County at an event meant to spotlight the urgent need for adoptive parents, particularly families of color.

Ashley is one of 348 so-called "waiting" children from around the state in need of adoptive families, children officials removed from unhealthy and dangerous living situations, terminating their parents' natural rights to parent them.

Some, like Ashley, may have reached a point where hope is nearly squeezed out of them, older children who might just as well believe in fairy tales as in having a mother or father and a permanent home.

Last year there were 264 children under state guardianship in Ramsey County with 87 of them finding permanent homes through the process of adoption.

This year the children span the range of age and race and ethnicity with the largest racial group being African-American at 57

percent. Twenty-seven percent are Caucasian, 4 percent American Indian, 6 percent Asian, 5 percent multi-race and .8 percent undetermined race. Of those, about 14 percent have Hispanic heritage.

In addition, many of these children have special needs, because of the abuse, neglect or abandonment they've suffered in their biological families.

### **Need for parents to adopt older kids**

Their diversity reflects a need, stresses Erin Sullivan Sutton, assistant commissioner for children and family services in the state Department of Human Services.

"We are particularly in need of parents willing and able to adopt older children, sibling groups and families that meet the diverse cultural needs of children in [foster] care." Sutton said. "We would like to have a pool of prospective adoptive families that reflect the diversity of children in out-of-home placement.

"We want people interested in committing to kids and caring for kids for a lifelong commitment," she said, adding that financial assistance is available to those who qualify.

Recruitment, formalizing of adoptions and celebration are all part of the 9 a.m. event Saturday, which is National Adoption Day. Featured speaker is Minnesota native and former NFL player Michael Lehan, telling the story of his adoption. The rest of the schedule is listed below.

Expected at the proceedings are an African-American single woman adopting her three nieces; a Caucasian family adopting a Hispanic child; a Caucasian family adopting five siblings they are related to; and the Caucasian couple adopting Ashley, who is of mixed race.

As for Ashley, since age 2 when she was taken from her mother for abuse and neglect, she has lived in a series of foster homes, 17 different places in 15 years — her life recorded in 12 volumes of public records.

Since May she has lived in the St. Michael home of Jennifer and Scott Saxe, both 38, the couple who is adopting her, and their biological children, Walter, 10, and Katherine, 8, who will become her brother and sister.

"We made the commitment when we brought her to our home," said Jennifer Saxe. "It was not a trial period; it was 'til-death-do-us-part," she said in telling an emotional story of how she and her husband, a physician, welcomed Ashley into their home in the belief God was backing them every step of the way to becoming adoptive parents.

The Saxes met Ashley in February at a special round-robin event designed to allow prospective adoptive parents and children to meet in a casual setting.

Initially, they hadn't planned to adopt an older child, but "we really clicked," Jennifer Saxe said, describing how Ashley sought them out as they were leaving, giving both Saxes hugs.

On their way home, "I started crying. I felt as if I had just left my child behind," Jennifer Saxe said.

### **Series of adjustments**

Living together has been a series of adjustments, but daily becomes easier, Saxe said, describing how Ashley tested their commitment to her. Sometimes she was the "brattiest kid ever."

Sometimes the Saxes' values, such as not allowing a child to drink alcohol and not dressing immodestly, clashed with those Ashley had experienced in a foster care setting. Ashley didn't know any better, Jennifer Saxe said.

Agrees Ashley: "The first couple weeks with them was like a honeymoon, then I started acting out to see how they would handle it," she said. "Now I'm like a normal teenager." She struggles, though, in school, with reading, writing, and long-term memory problems, she said.

Among those other children officially becoming families this weekend are the Jones sisters: Talisha, 8, Tiffany, 6, and Brandi, 22 months. Their aunt, Bernita Givens-Osborn, 51 years old and a divorced mother of two adult biological children, is adopting them. Then, "they're my kids," she said. She adopted Bruce, now 4, a year ago.

"They're all happy, good kids" who need the stability of a family, the life their biological parents didn't give them, the St. Paul woman said. "They need to be able to feel like they belong somewhere," said Givens-Osborn, who is African-American.

Though adoption placement decisions cannot by law be based on race or ethnicity, that feeling of belonging is important, adoption officials say.

That's why Ramey County is into the third year of the Permanent Families Recruitment Project, a five-year demonstration project enabled by a federal grant, to recruit more adoptive parents from among African-Americans.

"We want to even the pool of African-American children waiting with the number of African-American families available to adopt or provide foster care for them," said project manager Carolyn Smith.

Daycare provider Givens-Osborn applauds such efforts. About Caucasians adopting African-American children?

"I don't really feel that is adequate" if there is an African-American parent available to adopt, said Givens-Osborn, who was also a foster care provider for 15 years.

It's the cultural differences that concern her. Caucasian parents "don't know how to comb their hair," she said, offering one small example.

"If it was up to me, I would try to pair an African-American child with African-American homes and Caucasian children with Caucasian homes. But, by all means, it's in the best interest of children to put them where they're going to be loved. And that, to

me, doesn't have a color," Givens-Osborne said.

She thinks many African-American families are too occupied with caring for their own extended family members to adopt outside their families.

The race difference has not been a problem for Ashley or the Saxes, her mother-to-be says. "Everybody we know has been accepting of Ashley."

As for youngsters Walter and Katherine, they say having Ashley as their official big sister will be "fun."

---

### Related content



Michael Lehan

National Adoption Day celebration of adoption is at 9 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 20, at Ramsey County Juvenile and Family Justice Center, 25 West Seventh St., St. Paul. The program features Michael Lehan, former NFL football player, talking about his adoption and others.

COMMUNITY SKETCHBOOK | [FRI, NOV 19 2010 10:38 AM](#)



---

Available at:

[http://www.minnpost.com/communitysketchbook/2010/11/19/23545/a\\_happy\\_ending\\_ramsey\\_county\\_project\\_helps\\_children\\_find\\_adoptive\\_families](http://www.minnpost.com/communitysketchbook/2010/11/19/23545/a_happy_ending_ramsey_county_project_helps_children_find_adoptive_families)