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NEAR WEST



Tribune photos by David Zentz

Paul Sherman photographs Kiana, 10, for the first Illinois Heart Gallery, which will showcase images of Kiana and as many as 40 other foster children.

Picture-perfect adoptees

By Meg McSherry Breslin
Tribune staff reporter

She looked like a child movie star, sitting on a stool in front of a big mirror with bright lights. The hairstylist fussed over her, the brushes and combs and black makeup box on the counter.

"Brush it out," Kiana said, her eyes directed at her hair. She smiled at herself in the mirror, confident and excited.

After years in the foster care system, Kiana had never been professionally photographed. But now, she was the center of attention at the studio of North Side photographer Paul Sherman. For more than two hours, Sherman, an assistant and an array of social workers prepared 10-year-old Kiana for an ambitious new project designed to get older and harder-to-place foster children adopted.

Kiana's photograph will be displayed with those of as many as 40 other Illinois foster children in the state's first professional photogra-

Illinois uses professional photos of foster children to encourage parents to take in hard-to-place kids



Sherman's test shots of Kiana and her case worker, Pat Willeky.

phy exhibit of children available for adoption.

The photographs will be part of a traveling exhibit to appear at the Chicago Children's Museum from

Nov. 4 to 6 and then move to the Thompson Center.

In Illinois, about 1,000 children of more than 17,700 in foster care are eligible for adoptions, but the state is

only identifying a small group for the project.

It is a challenging one with humble beginnings. The idea came out of discussions earlier this year among Chicago-area mothers who saw the success of other states' exhibits. One mother called the state's Department of Children and Family Services and encouraged them to help her start an Illinois arm of the national effort, dubbed Heart Gallery.

Since the first Heart Gallery exhibit in 2001 in New Mexico, 40 states have started their own galleries, and hundreds of children have been adopted as a result. In New Mexico, 50 percent of people requesting information followed through with the licensing process, compared with just 5 percent before the exhibit. New Jersey has at least 40 children in the adoption process because of the gallery. In Connecticut, at least 19 children found homes after the first exhibit of 40 photographs.

PLEASE SEE PHOTOS, PAGE 4

PHOTOS: Emotional scars an issue in adoptions

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Diane Granito, an adoption specialist for the state of New Mexico, said the national effort she helped launch puts a needed spotlight on foster care children. In the past, many of these same children have been lost in lifeless photos accompanying their case files, she said.

"The biggest benefit of this is just letting people know these kids are here and how special they are," she said. "Everybody knows these children have been abused and neglected, and they have some baggage. But they have to be taught to keep this in perspective, that this child has a lot to offer their family."

Granito pointed to her favorite success stories, including two children adopted by volunteer Heart Gallery photographers, five teenaged siblings placed in a home together (they had been waiting eight years), and two young boys with special needs taken in by a couple last year.

With support from DCFS and Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn's office, the Illinois Heart Gallery group has identified several professional photographers willing to donate their time. Photographers around the state began working with the foster kids last month.

Older children harder to place

Lynn Goffman, a social worker from Buffalo Grove, was key in bringing Heart Gallery to Illinois. Goffman worked for years as a licensed home study worker for an adoption agency, visiting homes to ensure prospective parents were prepared to take in babies.

Working to get older children adopted—many of whom have been in multiple foster homes—is tougher, Goffman said. Many children have trouble trusting a family that expresses interest. Some have deep emotional scars from years in the foster system.

Still, Goffman is struck by the sweet and loving nature of the children she's met. The idea that this effort may lead to a home for a child who's been



Tribune photo by David Zentz

Kiana, 10, is made up in preparation for her photo shoot in the studio of North Side photographer Paul Sherman.

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—Diane Granito, New Mexico adoption specialist who helped launch the project

without one so long propels her.

"Families need to know these kids will have issues . . . and they'll need to give them time to trust," she said. "But they're also offering these kids a chance to not be alone in this world and to have a chance."

Child welfare leaders say there are pitfalls to the effort, particularly for children who put themselves out for photographs and still don't get adopted. The disappointment can be crushing.

"That's a constant worry for me," Granito said. "I see these kids at events, and it's really sad for me to see the same kids again and again and they really want a home. . . . But I have to weigh that against not going out there and having the chance to meet a family. We just have to weigh that against the possibility that this child's entire life could become better and have a brighter future."

While there are similar concerns in Illinois, many child advocates say the benefits seem greater than the risks, as long as organizers prepare children and prospective parents.

"The bottom line is I think any effort that is done that respects the dignity of the child is worth a try because nothing else seems to have worked," said Julie Tye, president of The Cradle child welfare agency in Evanston.

Organizers maintain optimism

DeAudrey Davis, director of the Adoption Information Center of Illinois, works with DCFS to place foster children with potential adoptive parents.

She said families will need to meet the children several times and learn more about their history before a path to adoption can be paved.

Despite the challenges, organizers—especially the volun-

teer photographers—carry a lot of hope.

Sherman, who's become the lead photographer for the Illinois effort, goes out of his way to make the children feel at home during a photo shoot. Adopted as a baby, he feels a special connection to many of his subjects.

A promising photo shoot

One afternoon, he welcomed 14-year-old Maurice into his studio to look at photos from his recent shoot.

Maurice obviously had warmed up to Sherman, inviting him to a talent show at his group home later in the month.

He stood up and belted out an emotionally charged rendition of an Alicia Keyes song, using Sherman's lint brush as a microphone.

Staring at the proofs in various poses, he looked pleased, choosing as his favorite a black-and-white image of himself sit-

ting with his hands around his knees and a slight smile.

As they sat in Sherman's spacious and modern photography studio listening to R&B music, a social worker asked Maurice why people should consider adopting older children as opposed to infants.

"Because the older kid needs help more," Maurice said after a long silence, glancing down at his faded corduroys. "And an older kid is lost, and he can't find his family."

Weeks later, the comment stuck with Sherman. Now, he's been drawn in by his subjects' difficult lives—and even more grateful that he found a home as a baby.

"That's a terrible feeling to be lost in life, especially at just 14," Sherman said. "Not everybody has a good family, but it sure is an important thing to work toward."

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