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Heart and home: Heart Gallery hopes to find adoptive families for kids in care

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GUELPH — The local children's aid society is launching a new program in October, hoping to attract attention and to get adults thinking about adopting older children who are now wards of the Crown.

The Heart Gallery of Guelph Wellington will feature professional photos of kids in care along with a short bio of the child including their interests and aspirations.

A good photograph can capture a child's personality, said Sheila Markle, director of children's services with Family and Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington, and with Guelph photographer Dean Palmer behind the lens, she hopes the photos will help foster kids find their forever families.

"It's a different way of profiling kids who are hard to place," Markle said. "Most people who want to adopt, want to adopt infants. Through the power of quality photography that captures their characters, we hope to reach adults who might not think about adopting, or might not think about adopting an older child."

The Heart Gallery is an initiative started in the United States. In 2010 the program launched in Ottawa with incredible results, Markle said.

"Of the 37 or 38 children profiled, 33 or 34 found homes," she said. "In the U.S., they've seen a 25 per cent increase in adoptions."

She hopes to see similar results locally when the program launches in October. The Guelph Wellington branch has about 80 children who are wards of the Crown, some who will soon be aging-out of the program.

Markle said when foster children reach 18, they lose some services, and when they reach 21, they are on their own.

“They all want a family,” Markle said. “Outcomes for kids are so much better when they have family supports. And we know that those who don’t have higher rates of incarceration, drug abuse and mental health concerns as adults. We don’t want to see that happen.”

As wards of the Crown, the agency can legally give consent for the photos to be displayed, but Markel said only children and youth who wanted to participate are part of the gallery.

Dean Palmer said it was a “wonderful” experience to photograph the kids.

“The photos tell the story of the subjects, but in a celebratory way. There is a lot of joy and life in these images, and I hope that it comes through in the final selections,” Palmer said.

The Heart Gallery launches Oct. 24 from 10 a.m. to noon in the Atrium of the River Run Centre.

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