

Heart Gallery launches adoption project

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Rob O'Flanagan/Mercury staff

The Heart Gallery project was launched Wednesday in the city. The Adoption Council of Canada and Family and Children Services of Guelph and Wellington County joint project seeks to find permanent homes for children and youth in foster care. Portraits of the kids will tour Guelph and Wellington County, beginning at the Macdonell Street office of The Co-operators.

GUELPH — The portraits are bright, casual and fun. There's Taylor with his teddy bear and Sam acting all grown up in his dragon shirt. Mae is holding a cat and Sebastian's smile is beaming. But the stories behind the portraits are about as heart-rending as they come.

Of the twelve pictures of quite common looking kids in the Heart Gallery Guelph Wellington, many teenagers or soon to be, not one of them has a permanent family they can go home to. It was enough to make many cry during a project launch Wednesday.

The Adoption Council of Canada, in conjunction with Family and Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington hope the Heart Gallery — a project to find children and youth in foster care permanent families — will do much more than bring tears to eyes. They hope it mean opening of hearts and homes to older children who await adoption is the hope.

About 75 people attended Wednesday's Guelph launch of the Heart Gallery — it's the second time a project such as this one has been done in Canada.

There are about 9,200 children in Ontario awaiting adoption, and many of them are older kids — children who could “age out of the system,” as one official put it, and end up without a home to go to.

A panel discussion involving four young women, who are either current or former foster children, gave attendees a stark glimpse into the lives of children who must be taken from their birth families and placed in care. For all, it has been a confusing, traumatic and sorrowful course of events. Those who were adopted by loving “forever families,” spoke of how the love of family changed their lives.

As the audience listened to the girls’ stories and insights, the 12 portraits displayed in a broad arch in front of the window of the River Run Centre’s atrium, took on added poignancy and urgency.

Guelph photographer Dean Palmer volunteered his time and artistry to the project. He called it one of the most fulfilling and meaningful of his career.

“I think these photos can make a difference, and I feel lucky that I was the one they approached,” he said in an interview.

Older children, youth and sibling groups are the hardest to find permanent families for, officials at the event said.

In an interview, Sarah Pedersen, executive director of Adoption Council of Canada, said there are numerous reasons why a child is taken from their birth family and cannot return to them. Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, neglect, or parents with substance abuse problems, are among the reasons. For their personal safety, such a decision has to be made.

“We try to rehabilitate the birth family with the hope that these children can be reunited with them,” Pedersen added. “But in some cases, it’s just not possible, so it becomes the job of child welfare to keep them safe while we find a permanent home.”

All of the children in the Heart Gallery portraits, Laura Eggertson, president of the Adoption Council of Canada said, are Crown wards.

“These children and youth are all in need of a permanent family or they will age out of the system without a home,” she said, adding that the children are in foster care, but are usually required to move a number of times while in the system.

“We are trying to find them permanent families that they can always go home to, no matter how old they are,” she said. “We all need families throughout our lives. We need someone to go to, someone to call in the middle of the night.”

There are thousands of Canadian kids every year who age out of the system and have no place to call home, she added.

“These are our kids,” Eggertson said. “We need to do better by them.”

Daniel Moore, executive director of Family and Children Services of Guelph and Wellington County, said adoption provides a lifetime of benefits to children and youth, giving them emotional security and all that comes with being a part of a committed family.

The group of four panellists spoke of the resilience and toughness of foster kids. All have had harsh life lessons, have faced serious difficulties, surmounted repeated disappointments and abuses, and are now ready to love and be loved by a new family.

A 17-year-old girl going by the name “Hope” said she shudders to think what additional abuses she might have suffered had she not been adopted by a loving family when she was nine.

“It’s hard, that feeling of being taken away from your family, and knowing you may never see them again, or a sibling,” she said, tearing up. “You never know where you are going to end up, or where you’re going to sleep. You don’t know what’s coming.”

She said she did not want to sugar-coat the challenges of raising a child that has been shuffled between many foster homes.

“We will give you hell,” she said. “We are going to rebel. We will test you, and keep testing you to see if you are willing to stick with us, no matter what.”

In her soft voice, a panellist going by the name “Amanda” said the obvious. “Everyone should have a home, no matter what.”

The Heart Gallery will tour Guelph and Wellington County, the portraits first being displayed in the lobby of The Co-operators on Macdonell Street in downtown Guelph. Handbills with profiles of the children and contact information are included with the portraits. Visit www.canadaheartgallery.ca, or call 1-888-54-ADOPT to learn more.

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