

A real home for Christmas

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Master Moore held his pen over the paper and paused.

His mom had asked him to write a Christmas list. Ten things. No guarantees he would get everything he wanted.

But as the boy pondered presents like a digital camera or an electronic keyboard, he realized nothing would ever compare to the gift he already had.

A real home.

"I have everything I want now," he said last week, sitting next to the red and white twinkling Christmas tree in his cozy Newark home.

With his parents on either side and the aroma of dinner wafting through the room, Master smiled with contentment.

"I can finally be a kid," he said.

It wasn't long ago the 14-year-old was a foster child with little hope of ever having a normal family life. Master was only 4 when the state took him, his two older brothers and several cousins away from their neglectful families. His brothers were adopted by a couple from Pennsylvania, but that left Master knocking around the foster care system on his own.

Then in early 2005 someone asked him to participate in The Heart Gallery of New Jersey, a traveling photographic exhibit of adoptable children in the state's care. Master was told someone might see his photograph, read his story and want to adopt him.

He shrugged. "Sure, why not?" he said.

Master had heard people say miracles happen, but he had never seen one himself. Still, he decided to tell his story -- if not for himself, then for all of the kids just like him.

"Master, in particular, felt regardless of whether he found a family it was important for people to know that even teenagers want and deserve families," said Najlah Feanny, a co-founder of the New Jersey Heart Gallery.

"Maybe it was a self-defense mechanism -- 'If I don't reveal I'm desperate to be part of a family I won't be crushed when I don't find one.' That kind of maturity from a child stuck with me long after we photographed him."

Master had lived in a number of foster homes by the time he was featured in the first Heart Gallery exhibition in 2005 at the Liberty Science Center in Jersey City.

At the time, he was sharing a bunk bed with another foster child in a tiny space off the living room of a home in Bridgeton.

It was his 12th placement.

In a Star-Ledger story about the exhibit, Master admitted he felt like a guest in the foster home, sometimes an unwelcome one.

Taped to a wall was a pencil-drawn floor plan -- an arrow pointed to his bed with the words: "You are here."

Friends weren't allowed in the house, so Master spent most afternoons alone in his room, practicing his chess moves.

His foster mother was unpredictable, sometimes nice, sometimes not, he said.

During the two years he lived there, she never kissed him goodnight.

"As you can see, what's missing in my life is a real home," he said at the time

Master said he wished the Heart Gallery would change his luck. Maybe someone would see his picture and read his story. Maybe someone would want him for their son.

But he didn't believe in fairy tale endings. "No foster kid does," he said.

Then salvation arrived in a 2004 GMC Envoy.

THE FINAL PLACEMENT

Master's story had caught the eye of a kindly Newark man who coincidentally shared the same last name.

Michael Moore is a driving instructor. His wife, Tracy, is a telecommunications analyst for Prudential. With both their children married and living on their own, they were now empty nesters in their 40s.

The couple had been talking about adopting a child from the state's foster care system. One reason was that Michael Moore had another thing in common with Master. He, too, had been a foster child.

So in March 2006, the couple drove 125 miles to Bridgeton in their Envoy to meet Master. They visited several more times, then brought the boy back to Newark to meet their extended family.

By June, Master was living with the couple. Six months later he was adopted.

"And they lived happily ever after," Tracy said on the day the adoption was final.

Except for one other small detail: Master would not be the Moores' last adopted child.

Last year, they began thinking about taking in another child. Master asked if they would consider his cousin, Rayshawn, who was a year older. Both boys had been in foster care at the same time, and occasionally Master would see his cousin at a "match" party, where foster children are taken to be observed by potential adoptive parents. Neither was ever chosen.

The Moores knew Rayshawn's name. Ironically, two years earlier they had inquired about him after seeing his photograph in the inaugural Heart Gallery exhibit. But the Moores were told that Rayshawn already had been placed, so they continued their search and ultimately found Master.

However, Rayshawn's match didn't work out and he again became available for adoption. He started living with the Moores eight months ago, and on Thursday, the couple signed his adoption papers.

"Now I have to call him my brother," Master said.

The boys act just like siblings, teasing each other and sometimes bickering. But they also enjoy each other's company, even though they have different interests.

Master is studious and was voted by his 8th-grade class as Most Likely to Succeed. He's now a freshman at Newark Tech High School, where his favorite subject is world history.

Ray is athletic and plays basketball for West Side High.

Both boys are thriving in their new life together.

On the living room wall hangs a red stocking with the name "Master" embroidered on it. It is the first Christmas stocking he has ever had.

"When I was in foster homes, I never knew where I would be going the next day," he said. "Here, I know when I wake up that I'm here to stay. That this is home. I'm going to live here the rest of my life."

Tracy, an affectionate woman who puts faith and family before everything, clutched her chest and rolled her eyes. "The rest of your life?" she cried.

The whole family laughed.

"Life is great," said Tracy. "Really great. We're having fun."

"We're really happy," Michael added.

Near the Moores' home, there is a Wendy's restaurant that still has photographs of adoptable children from the original Heart Gallery exhibit hanging on the wall.

Master's picture was among them.

When Tracy saw it recently, she asked the manager to please take it down.

"Because Master is not available," she said, wagging her finger.

"Master is ours."

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