

... But Now I See



How the Heart Gallery is Opening Eyes of Faith to Children in Foster Care



Two women discuss Heart Gallery pictures of Texas children waiting to be adopted.

The response is almost always the same. When everyday people in churches in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area of Texas, where I live, first hear about the realities of children in foster care, the bewildered response comes quickly: “I had no idea.” There is little doubt that far too many people simply do not know about the realities that face hundreds of thousands of children in the United States. And people seem to equally have “no idea” that there are so many different ways to love, serve and positively impact the lives and

futures of these precious children.

TURNING NUMBERS INTO FACES

Whether we are talking about the more than 500,000 children in foster care nationwide, more than 100,000 of whom are waiting for an adoptive family, or the fact that 20,000 kids turn 18 and “age-out” of foster care each year without a permanent family, the numbers and statistics are staggering. But honestly, I am not altogether sure our minds or our hearts can really process numbers like these. After all, we are not really talking about

“numbers” we are talking about children. Yet, these children we know only as statistics are so “close” to us and their most pressing needs, such as protection, safety, love and permanency, are so basic that it seems for many they have become all too easy to overlook and ignore.

Where I live, however, there is the beginning of a movement that is turning “numbers” back into “faces” — the faces of real children with real needs, hopes and dreams. Since September 2006, 16 churches have promi-

nently displayed a Heart Gallery exhibit as a way to open the eyes and hearts of people in their congregations.

First started in 2001 in New Mexico, the Heart Gallery is a unique professional quality photographic exhibit of children in foster care who are waiting to be adopted by loving, permanent families. Heart Gallery exhibits have proven to be a valuable and effective tool in raising awareness of children in foster care and motivating people to foster, adopt and serve these children in other important ways. The Heart Gallery can now be found in nearly every state, and the exhibits have predominantly been displayed in art galleries, court houses and shopping malls. Only recently has the Heart Gallery begun to make its way into churches.

The churches in Dallas-Ft. Worth that have hosted the Heart Gallery in the past two years represent various denominations, including Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal and non-denominational churches, range in size from 300 to 15,000 and are located in communities all across our area. By opening their doors and hearts, people within our churches are responding to the call to be a voice for some of our community's most vulnerable and hurting children — and they have the potential to make a tremendous and lasting impact in our foster care system.

Penny Cook, director of The Faith Connection, an effort in Dallas-Ft. Worth that has been instrumental in helping many churches host the Heart Gallery, describes well the potential impact the Heart Gallery is having in churches: "The Heart Gallery has provided congregations a valuable connection to children in foster care by giving them an opportunity to see their faces and look into their eyes. The exhibit gives people a connection to these beautiful children and truly

opens their hearts and minds to the possible ways they can serve. In many churches, families have stepped forward to become foster or adoptive families, volunteer advocates or mentors. Some churches have even formed ministries to help support foster and adoptive families. And one of the greatest benefits of the Heart Gallery in churches is the incred-

The seeds that were planted resulted in an increased awareness of the children's needs and several families moved forward to become foster or adoptive parents or got involved in other ways.

ible number of prayers offered on behalf of these children. The Heart Gallery serves as a catalyst and is planting seeds that are resulting in wonderful expressions of service."

CHURCHES MAKING CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE A FOCUS

The church where my family attends, Irving Bible Church in Irving, Texas, has experienced first-hand the impact of the Heart Gallery. It was one of the first churches in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area to host a Heart Gallery exhibit in 2006 as part of a church-wide focus on children at-risk. Even though the exhibit at the time was quite simple and relatively small with only 18 photos featuring 24 children, it made an impact on a number of people who saw it. The seeds that were planted resulted in an increased awareness of the children's needs and several families moved forward to become foster or adoptive parents or got involved in other ways. In addition, the adoption ministry at Irving Bible Church, called Tapestry, began making foster care and foster adoption a more significant focus and is now providing ongoing support and resources to foster families throughout the community.

Following the month long exhibit in 2006, our church reached a simple and obvious conclusion: if hosting the Heart Gallery was a positive experience for our congregation then it was likely to be equally positive for other churches. So we began looking for other churches in the area that would be willing to host the Heart Gallery and, equally impor-

tant, offer various ways for people in their congregations to become involved.

The results were amazing. Within six months five additional churches hosted the Heart Gallery exhibit, each for several weeks, and several more churches were making plans to do the same. It was clear something was happening, something that both Texas Child Protective Services and many churches in our area were genuinely excited about.

At that time we decided to give a name to this growing effort to "help churches help children in foster care" — and The Faith Connection was launched. From day one Penny Cook has led this church-based, volunteer effort. As a result of her efforts and the cooperation and support of many others, the Heart Gallery of North Texas has now grown to include more than 80 photos including more than 100 children — and is still growing. Because churches are making foster care a focus, dozens of new foster and adoptive families from various churches have been recruited and many advocates and volunteers have also stepped forward to serve children in foster care.



A man stands back to view the step of the Texas Heart Gallery at the Irving Bible Church. Right, Families gather at Irving Bible Church in April to view Heart Gallery pictures of Texas children waiting to be adopted.



Taci Kistler, director of Congregational Care at Custer Road United Methodist Church in Plano, Texas, led the effort at her church to host the Heart Gallery in October 2007. Kistler recalls the impact at her church, “The Heart Gallery touches everyone who sees it because it does more than simply put a face on the foster care system — it puts heart

into the matter. The children reach out to you through their beautiful smiles and loving eyes and remind you that we are all God’s children put on this earth to care for one another.”

Following the Heart Gallery exhibit at Custer Road, Kistler organized an information meet-

ing where people could learn more about foster care, adoption and a variety of volunteer opportunities. As a result, six families from the church have become licensed to foster or adopt.

Similar results are being experienced at many of the other churches hosting the

(kids in waiting)



Joshua, 15, enjoys riding a skate board and playing basketball. He also likes to watch movies, especially if they are about superheroes or animals. His favorite foods are pizza and Chinese food. Joshua loves to go out on family outings.

A ninth grader, Joshua enjoys school, especially if he’s learning about science. Learning new things is a top priority for him. He is in counseling which will need to continue after placement.

This teen would like his own family who will love him unconditionally. His caseworker will consider all families for him. Financial assistance may be available for adoption-related services.

For New Mexico children, both homestudied and non-homestudied New Mexico families are encouraged to inquire; only homestudied families from other states should do so. For more information, contact The Adoption Exchange at (800) 451-5246. Child ID 86439

Heart Gallery. Most recently, in April Irving Bible Church once again welcomed the Heart Gallery. The exhibit, complete with more than 80 photos and artwork created by local children in care, opened with a Saturday night reception where people from Child Protective Services, local foster agencies and children's community organizations, dozens of churches and more than 100 foster and adoptive families were invited. The focus at Irving Bible Church continued the next day during each of the Sunday services, and after each service people were presented with various ways they could become involved. As we have consistently done for more than two years now, foster care and foster adoption training classes are again being offered to those who want to move forward, and slowly but surely we are becoming a church that is experiencing what it means to fully embrace children in foster care and the families who love and serve them.

**OVERWHELMING
AN OVERWHELMED SYSTEM**

Despite these exciting "successes" there is still so much more that churches can and should do. Increasingly, many states are becoming open to the idea that the church is a tremendous source of hope and help for children in foster care. In 2003, the Texas legislature created a formal faith-based program called Congregations Helping in Love and Dedication, or CHILD, which reaches out to faith communities and invites them to become part of the team dedicated to serving and caring for children in the foster system. Many other states have formal and informal faith-based initiatives, all of which are aimed at getting churches "back in the game" when it comes to addressing the needs of children in care.

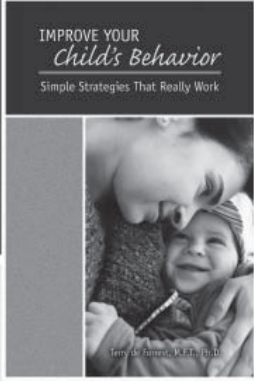
It is no secret that in many ways the foster care system across the United States is overwhelmed. While there is much that can and should be changed within the system itself, the reality is that far too many churches have allowed children in foster care to go

overlooked and ignored for far too long. But it is never too late. I am convinced that people in our churches, motivated by their faith to put "love into action," can overwhelm an overwhelmed system. With their nearly endless supply of creativity and resources and their passionate desire to selflessly serve, many in our churches can confront the stark realities that face so many children with "soul force" and in so doing change the futures for thousands of children.

The great British abolitionist John Newton is probably best known for his hymn, Amazing Grace. Written in the latter years of his life as he was gradually going blind, the hymn speaks of the power of grace to open the eyes through which we can truly see — the eyes of the heart. Throughout our community we are seeing "the eyes of the heart" opened as people literally come face-to-face with children in foster care.

There is something truly unique about seeing the faces of children in foster care — faces of every age, shape, size and hue. These faces communicate far more than any statistic ever could. They almost seem to stare back as we gaze on them as if to ask — "How much do you really believe? How much do you really care?" In churches located throughout Texas, we are encountering many who reply, "I had no idea . . . but now I see." And now that their eyes have been opened, neither they, nor the children they are called to serve will ever be the same. ❁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michael Monroe and his wife Amy lead Tapestry, a ministry at Irving Bible Church. Tapestry serves and supports adoptive and foster families throughout the community. You can learn more about Tapestry at www.tapestry@irvingbible.org. To learn more about how The Faith Connection is helping churches help children in foster care, visit www.TheFaithConnection.org or contact Penny Cook at penny@TheFaithConnection.org.



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