

Metro families grow on National Adoption Day

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The judge later admitted she wasn't the first to appear in chambers and sit on his lap. But when she did, 3-year-old Heaven Billingsley was probably the most thoroughly photographed.

It was Saturday, and it was, after all, National Adoption Day. And, while about 20 witnesses — photographers, reporters, staffers and family members — looked on, Fulton County Chief Juvenile Court Judge Sammy Jones beamed and played to the crowd like he was the new adoptive dad on a day when 30 foster children would find new parents.



Rich Addicks/Staff

Tracie Thomas, 38, Atlanta, holds her new daughter, Taylor Danielle Ruth Thomas, 21 months, who sleeps during a ceremony at the Romae T. Powell Juvenile Justice Center in downtown Atlanta, where 24 children were adopted, including Taylor, as part of National Adoption Day.

"What are you doing, just picking out the prettiest one?" Judge Jones joked, smiling at Billingsley's new adoptive mother, Charlotte Billingsley, 42, as the little girl with pigtails sitting on his lap smiled and laughed.

"Do you wish her name to be 'Heaven?' " the judge asked the girl's mom as he went through the list of questions that had to be answered before it was all perfectly legal.



Rich Addicks/Staff

Charlotte Billingsley, of Atlanta, gets a big kiss from her newly adopted child, Heaven, 3.

"Yes," said the legal mom about to be.

This was the sixth annual National Adoption Day and but one cherished moment in a morning that brimmed with them. Among the dozens gathered in the lobby of the Romae T. Powell Juvenile Justice Center on Pryor Street, there didn't appear to be a single face uncreased by a radiant smile.



Rich Addicks/Staff

Janelle Connally, 59, of Atlanta, and her daughter, Monica Brown (right), read to Amelia, 18 months, prior to Connally adopting the child.

"This is a happy, happy, happy day," said Dee Horn, a volunteer with a group that brought boxes of "first official family dinners" for the 18 families that adopted 30 children. "This is the happiest day we've ever had in this building."

As Judge Jones left his chambers and worked his way through the building to a noon gathering of all the new parents and adopted children, he talked about the momentousness of the day.

"The attention this day has brought to adoptions has had a huge impact," he said. "It has caused adoptions to happen more quickly, and brought down the average age of children adopted dramatically."

Five years ago, said Jones, the average age of children who were adopted was close to 12 because the system moved so slowly that children would stay in foster care sometimes longer than a decade.

"I have seen them wait over 12 years," Jones said. "Today, the average age of the children being adopted is closer to 6 years old. And I didn't see one child who waited over six months to be adopted" after the child's ties to the child's biological parents were legally "terminated."

Nearby, Jannelle Connally, 59, and husband Jack said they planned to adopt 18-month old Amelia from the moment they took her in as a foster child when she was 3 days old.

Last year, the couple adopted Aiden Connally, now 27 months old. Janelle Connally said adopting children runs in her family.

"Three of my daughters have adopted children," she said. "We have a total of eight adopted children. I guess we just love children."

That sentiment seemed universal as the group gathered in a conference room to hear Judge Jones' address and a pep talk from Georgia Supreme Court Justice P. Harris Hines, who praised the adopting parents and advised them that from now on "you're going to be a little bit tired all the time."

Gretchen Winfield and husband William, who adopted two children Saturday and six since 2003, told the crowd that what the children need most is love and a good home. Money matters, she said, take care of themselves.

"Every time we adopt a child, my husband asks me if we're through yet," Gretchen Winfield said. "I tell him, 'God hasn't told me we're through yet.'"

"And he's like, 'Really?' "

Then she motioned at a friend in the back of the room, Vivian Hood, 45, who on Saturday adopted four siblings — twin 16-year old sisters, a younger sister and a brother.

Hood who was holding four black-framed "Certificate of Family Membership" adoption plaques in her lap, said later she didn't learn until last Monday that the adoptions had gone through and she and four new family members would be a part of National Adoption Day.

She would hang the plaques for Tarshai, Tiara, Diamond and Deja on a wall at home Saturday night. "We call the wall our hall of fame," she said.