

The Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange is a program of Judson Center and is funded by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

To learn about foster care adoption and view photolisting and videos of children, visit our website at www.mare.org.



How a day at the beach led to adoption from foster care

The notion of adoption from foster care hit home with Matt and Jen Brooks in the summer of 2018 as they sat on a beach watching other parents and their children building sandcastles and playing surfside games.

The childless couple, who have been married for seven years, had wanted to start a family through adoption but couldn't agree how. For Jen, adoption from foster care seemed a natural calling since she's the permanency specialist for the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange (MARE) and had worked in the field for 10 years.

However, Jen's training and Matt's four years as an attorney at an auto insurance claims law firm conditioned them to explore all options. So the couple talked about other ways to start their family such as infant and international adoptions.

Then came that August day on the beach when they saw other parents frolicking with their children on a sandy shore, which cemented their decision.

"We said to each other, 'This is boring,'" says Jen. "We wanted a family, and the way that our jobs and careers are, we needed a school-aged child. So we decided to just put out feelers about foster care adoption."

From "feelers," their adoption process soon went to what Jen calls "full-throttle."

"I contacted a friend of mine who works in foster care and got some information. Within two weeks, we were at an orientation at an agency."

They started the Parent Resources for Information Development and Education (PRIDE) training in early October and by the end of November 2018 their home study was approved, which licensed them for foster care and approved them for adoption.



Wait, home study revisited

Shortly after approval of their home study, Matt and Jen found a sibling group on the MARE website who excited them. "They were cute, and they were everything that we were looking for," says Jen, who along with Matt decided to make an inquiry a couple of days later.

"And then we were denied," says Jen, stilled dismayed about the news. "I was like, 'How is this possible?' I've been in the field for 10 years, I have trauma training and Matt's successful in his career."

Instead of wallowing in disappointment, the Brooks turned to resources for help. One of those was MARE

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Amanda can give families taste of royalty

Amanda has the “Frozen” fervor and says that toys and games based on the movie rank high on her favorite things.

If she could visit anywhere, Amanda would travel to a castle so she can be treated like the royalty in the movie. “I want to be a princess,” she says. “I love to play dress up and princess.”

Amanda also likes playing with L.O.L. Surprise! dolls, which she says make her laugh. In addition to playing, Amanda enjoys reading, watching TV and relaxing on the weekends.

Amanda’s other favorite activities include playing with her tablet and going to summer camp. “She loves writing and drawing with colorful paper and pens,” says a person close to her, who describes Amanda as a sweet, loving, imaginative and playful girl with a warm smile and a good heart.

With attributes like that, she’d be a natural in a future forever family. Amanda looks forward to swimming and shopping with them. Most of all, she just wants “to be a family,” she says.



Amanda, C08879.



Justin, C09889.

Justin loves lending a helping hand

Expect easy times with Justin in the house.

After all, he’s a funny, friendly and outgoing young man. “Justin has been described as someone you would enjoy being around,” says a person close to him. “Justin has a kind and helpful heart. He stated he enjoys helping others as much as he can.”

Because of that, he should have little difficulty gaining clients once he becomes a music producer, which is his career dream. Justin hopes to visit California one day because it looks amazing to him.

If he had three wishes, Justin would want to be able to fly, to be rich and to have a dirt bike. Justin appears to be living the dream already because he likes spending time with friends, watching YouTube, playing video games and playing sports, especially football.

Justin also enjoys playing Rummy. In school he likes learning about history and says it’s his favorite subject.

His other favorite things include the American bison, the color red for color and eating lake perch. Justin adds that his favorite holidays are Easter, Christmas and Halloween.

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Program Manager Michelle Parra, who suggested Jen revisit the couple's home study for answers. "I looked at it, and it was just so basic," says Jen. "It was very well written, but there was no mention of our experience and our achievements."

That's when Matt and Jen decided to "toot our own horn and re-introduce ourselves" by writing a letter to their adoption agency. Their goal was to persuade the workers why Matt and Jen should be picked as adoptive parents, and less than a week later, they received a call.

The letter worked, and they were about to meet the youth who would become their son.

"We were very excited and felt really good because they thought of us for this child," says Jen.

A family in the making

His MARE narrative says Cameron, or Cam, is a colorful kid who loves rainbow sherbet. While his tastes have changed since then to frozen yogurt, he still smiles when he gets something sweet.

"He gets this look on his face," says Jen. "It's just a huge smile from ear to ear."

He especially beams when he gets to play at Dave & Buster's, which is where Cam met his future forever family.

"When we were walking in, I had probably the biggest butterflies I've had since my wedding day," says Jen. "We were very nervous yet excited."

As Jen and Matt entered the eatery and entertainment establishment, Cam and his worker were playing a game. Soon



they all sat down for lunch to get acquainted, and a connection ensued.

"Right when we saw him it was very natural," says Jen. "It was very easy to have a conversation with him. When I left there, I felt as though my heart was full."

Whoa! We're moving fast!

Three days later, the Brookses got a call seeking their foster home for Cam right away. After getting the news about Cam's impending move into their home, they needed a fast-action plan.

"We were ready, but we weren't," says Matt. "Everything in the house that needed to be done was done, but all of a sudden it was all the logistics."

The move happened at the end of Christmas break, and on the day he arrived, Cam needed new shoes and clothes, and he had to enroll the next day in a nearby school. They had to arrange his dentist and doctor appointments, which meant finding a pediatrician.

Once the initial needs were met, Matt and Jen reached out and received help. In the ensuing days

and weeks, they quickly became a family.

"My bond with him came easily," says Jen, and Matt adds that his did as well within a few days.

From the beach to home

Even though Jen and Matt's bond came quickly, it's been a slower process for Cam, which is not unusual when a youth from foster care transitions into a new home and family. Besides bonding, other issues can arise, and Matt and Jen experienced those as well and sought help to alleviate them.

Now, listening to Matt and Jen talk about Cam brings to mind the kind of relationship that's often special for families who adopt a youth from foster care.

"When I first met him, I thought this is right," says Jen.

Cam thinks it's right, too, even though he was anxious at Dave & Buster's and admits that when he first met his new forever family, he was happy yet nervous. He says the transition into his new home felt "weird" but in a good way.

Now, he says he enjoys spending time with his new family, and he especially loves boys' nights out with his new dad as they attend sporting events such as Michigan State basketball games.

Note

Although the Brookses' training and home study moved along very quickly, most adoptive parents should be prepared for the process to possibly take longer. Workers strive to accommodate adoptive parents, but it can take a bit more time for the approval process.

Be sure to read our second part of this story in the next MARE Family Newsletter for Matt and Jen's tips and more information.

Meet MARE's new specialist

Karenbea Sewell has joined MARE's Match Support Program as a specialist.

In her new role, she'll be serving families who are in the process of moving forward with adopting a youth from foster care.

What is your professional background?

Before coming to MARE, I worked as a mentor coordinator and then as the Mentor Program supervisor for Child Safe Michigan, an affiliate of Judson Center. That position ended when my family moved, so I was more than thrilled when I saw a job posting for a match support specialist at Judson Center's Ann Arbor location. I have a master of social work degree from Wayne State University, and my past positions ranged from being a



school social worker to owning my own organizing business.

What draws you to child welfare?

I'm drawn to child welfare because I have seen firsthand the positive effects a supportive and loving home can have on a child. I want to help as many children as possible have that experience.

What interested you in becoming a Match Support Specialist?

I believe in the concept of MARE's Match Support Program and what it stands for. Since adoption can be a challenging journey for both the adoptive family and the youth being adopted, I am honored to help ease the process for them and assist them in achieving their goal of becoming a forever family.

What are three fun facts about you?

I'm very proud of my son, who also happens to be in his Big 10 college's marching band. I also like to sew, and I enjoy stand-up comedy.

Learn more about the Match Support Program at mare.org > For Families > Match Support Program or call 800-589-6273.

Join us at the Michigan Heart Gallery Grand Opening

The Michigan Heart Gallery Grand Opening is a great event that you won't want to miss. It is scheduled for Saturday, April 25, 2020, at the Emagine Theater in Royal Oak. The show features the unveiling of this year's Michigan Heart Gallery, a traveling photographic exhibit featuring photos of youth currently in the foster care system waiting for their forever family through adoption.



The festivities also include food and refreshments and a red carpet where many youth will walk and get their pictures taken. This year's Michigan Heart Gallery Grand Opening includes a special feature film that we're sure you'll love. So, mark your calendars, and come join us for this truly remarkable event. Make sure to follow us on Facebook and Twitter for updates.

Calendar of Events

March 8, 2020

Art & Soul Meet & Greet, Pontiac
10:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.

April 4, 2020

MARE Meet & Greet, Birmingham
11 a.m.-2 p.m.

April 25, 2020

Heart Gallery Grand Opening,
Royal Oak

June 27, 2020

MARE Meet & Greet, Detroit
2 p.m.-5:30 p.m.

For more information regarding these events contact Jessica Thompson, MARE Recruitment Specialist: jessica_thompson@judsoncenter.org