

TENNESSEAN OP-ED: GIVE A FOSTER CHILD A REASON FOR THANKS

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Read the original on the Tennessean website.

Thanksgiving, we gather together to give thanks. But thousands of children in foster care have much less to be thankful for.

Today, we celebrate National Adoption Day, an effort to raise awareness of the 123,000 children in foster care waiting to find permanent, loving families. Here in Tennessee, more than 7,500 children live in some form of out-of-home care. Too many of these children will never get adopted before they turn 18; called aging-out of the system. They will go through life alone, not sharing holidays with parents, not having a father to walk them down the aisle, a mother to give them a hug.

While the number of children in foster care has significantly decreased over the past decade, the number of adoptions has remained unchanged. On average, children wait over three years before finding a "forever family" through adoption. During this time, these children are moved from foster home to home, changing schools, losing friends, separated from siblings, and wondering if they will ever have any one to call "Mom" or "Dad" again.

Many in our community are already making a difference. This year, I nominated Douglas and Jennie Webb from Cheatham County as "Angels in Adoption." The Webbs have fostered 17 children and recently added two new adopted children to their family. As a long time member of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI), I am proud to recognize their outstanding commitment to providing children with loving and stable homes.

Not every one can become a foster or adoptive parent, but that doesn't mean any one can't get involved.

Nashville's own performing artist Jimmy Wayne has become a hero in the adoptive community for creating the "Meet Me Halfway" project to raise awareness for foster youth. Last Jan. 1, Jimmy began a 1,700-mile journey across the country. The singer, a former foster child and homeless teen, walked from Nashville to Phoenix to raise awareness of at-risk youth and teens that are in danger of aging out of the foster system. His effort has inspired thousands to join his cause.

Middle Tennesseans showed the world our true character in the way we rebuilt after the flood. Our recovery proved that when every one does their part, there is no obstacle we can't overcome. Giving just a little bit of your free time can make a huge impact.

Talk to your friends and neighbors to raise awareness for the thousands of children without a home. Become a mentor to a foster child, and encourage your church community to support adoptive youth. Together, we can solve this children's crisis in our state.

According to a recent survey, nearly 48 million Americans have considered adopting from foster care. If just one in 500 of these adults adopt, all the 123,000 children in foster care waiting for adoption would have permanent families. Sometimes all it takes is a word of encouragement and the support of a friendly neighbor to give a family the courage to take on this responsibility. You can be that voice.

As families across Middle Tennessee gather to celebrate the holidays, let's focus on giving each child something to be thankful for.###