

**EMBARGOED UNTIL: 2 p.m., Saturday, Nov. 14, 2009 (Event is 1-3 p.m.)**

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## **Families and Individuals recognized at Adoption Celebration**

BISMARCK, N.D. – Families are created in many ways, and several truly exemplary adoptive families, birth parents, advocates, and others were honored on Nov. 14, in Bismarck at the 2009 Adoption Celebration held at Ascension Church. Department of Human Services officials and licensed child placement agencies co-hosted the event to present recognition awards and to remind people about the impact adoption has on children who need permanent loving homes.

“The dreams that come true through adoption make this a very special celebration,” said master of ceremony Kate Kenna, who is an adoptive parent and directs the department’s regional human service centers in Grand Forks and Devils Lake. “I know the joy of parenting a child who came to us through the foster care system, and as a former child welfare worker, I have watched many families grow in more ways than sheer numbers through the adoption process.”

Honorees included two families who received the *2009 Foster Care Adoptive Family Award*: **David and Catherine Heyd** of **LaMoure**, and **Keith and Tracy Wenger** of **Minot**. The Heyds are the proud parents of five children. Four joined their family through adoption. They provided foster care to two of the children prior to their adoptions and remain licensed foster parents.

The Wengers are PATH licensed foster parents, and their family currently includes four children. They fostered two of them before receiving permission from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Council to adopt the sisters. They continue to ensure that the children have strong ties to their heritage and can maintain a relationship with their birth families and other siblings.

**Al and Deb Zahursky** of **Max**, and birth mother **Kayla** of **Devils Lake**, shared the *2009 Adoption Triad Award* for maintaining an ongoing, open relationship following their son’s adoption as an infant. The Zahurskys knew they wanted an open adoption, and Kayla selected them to raise her child. The parents stay in touch.

**Kirk and Nancy Johnson** of **Minot**, received the *Multicultural Award* for their efforts to nurture the cultural heritage of their son who was born in Vietnam. The Johnsons had lived overseas, and Kirk previously worked with the Vietnamese population in Chicago. When they received confirmation they were matched with their son, they studied the culture of Vietnam and learned enough of the language so they could communicate with him when they traveled to Vietnam to meet him. They took their son on a tour of his birth country documenting the trip and have connected with a family in their community that is from Vietnam.

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**Joe Westman** of **Bismarck** received the *Youth Excellence Award*, which is presented to young adults formerly in foster care who have excelled and are contributing to their communities. Joe was adopted by his foster parents who continue to provide foster care to other children in need.

Event organizers also recognized **Karen Berg** of **Minot**, and a business, **Family Christian Stores** of **Fargo**, with the *Adoption Advocate Award* for their dedicated work on behalf of children and families. Berg is the regional director of PATH (Professional Association of Treatment Homes) North Dakota's Northwest Region and has dedicated almost 24 years of service to the child welfare field. A licensed social worker, Berg works to recruit and train foster parents to care for children and youth with special emotional, behavioral and medical needs and to reunite children with birth families when possible.

Since 2003, Family Christian Stores in the West Acres Mall has distributed "Barnabas Bears" to needy children. The first year, the store distributed 80 of the teddy bears to children who received adoption services. Bears have also been donated to children in foster care. This year, the store expects to distribute about 500 of the toy bears.

In addition to the state awards, AASK Program Director **Leanne Johnson** of **Fargo** and adoptive parents **Robert and Vicki Thu** of **Jamestown** were also recognized. They were nominated by the state's Congressional delegation and received the *2009 Angels in Adoption Award* presented in September from the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute.

"Today we celebrated the families who have found each other, and I hope we can bring attention and hope for those who are still waiting," said Kenna referring to the 24 children in foster care in the state who need adoptive homes, but do not have identified adoptive families. They range in age from 4 to 16.

Last year 126 children were adopted from the public foster care system in North Dakota. Of the other 196 adoptions filed in North Dakota that year, 20 involved children from foreign countries; 44 involved healthy infants; and 132 involved adoptions by stepparents.

Families and individuals interested in exploring adoption can contact one of the following licensed child placement agencies in North Dakota: Adults Adopting Special Kids (AASK), Catholic Charities ND, Lutheran Social Services of ND, The Village Family Service Center, Christian Family Life Services, God's Children Adoption Agency, Inc., LDS Family Services, PATH ND, and Permanent Family Resource Center. Agency information is online at [www.nd.gov/dhs/services/childfamily/adoption/agencies.html](http://www.nd.gov/dhs/services/childfamily/adoption/agencies.html). Placement agencies provide services including family recruitment, preparation and assessment, child preparation and placement, and post-placement support.

For adoption and foster care information, contact the Department of Human Services' Children and Family Services Division at 701-328-2316, 1-800-245-3736, e-mail [dhscfs@nd.gov](mailto:dhscfs@nd.gov), or visit [www.nd.gov/dhs/services/childfamily/adoption](http://www.nd.gov/dhs/services/childfamily/adoption).

The Frank O. Becker Endowment Fund, a component of the North Dakota Community Foundation, provided funding for the celebration.

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