

Finding Your Child

Local organization uses photographs to find families for foster kids



By Terry Kaufman
Local Heroes

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the pictures at the Heart Gallery of Sacramento speak volumes. The photos reveal the souls of children whose only wish is to have a home, to belong to a family. For many of the children, the search for a family has gone on for years.

The Sacramento Heart Gallery was started in 2005 after local residents read a story about the original Santa Fe, New Mexico, Heart Gallery in the pages of *Parade* magazine. The story told of the gallery's success in placing children in the foster-care system with loving adoptive families. Rosemary Papa, a Sacramentan who had adopted two little girls after seeing their faces in a 2-by-3-inch black-and-white photograph, understood the power of the picture and decided to found a local branch of the Heart Gallery.

"Several of us saw the *Parade* article," recalls Karen Seeback, a Heart Gallery board member who was working with Lilliput Children's Services, a nonprofit adoption agency, at the time. "Rosemary showed everyone how to make it happen."



Paul and Joann Carpitcher and their children. Back row: Catalina Haynes, Heart Gallery photographer, Paul and Leah Santos, Heart Gallery board member. Middle row: Nicole, 16, Joann, Leland, 5, Natalie, 12, and Zachary, 6. Front row: Aunnalisa, 4 and Angelica, 9

Following its first exhibit in 2005, the Sacramento Heart Gallery successfully placed 55 percent of the children with adoptive families. Although Papa subsequently moved away from the area, the gallery that she established continues to grow, nurtured by a dedicated group of photographers, artists, businesses and community volunteers from public and private agencies throughout the region.

One of those volunteers, Leah Santos, is a mother of two who was herself adopted as an infant. "This was my way of giving back," she says

simply. "My husband and I had tried to adopt before our first child was born, and we saw what a commitment it is for the adoptive families. Our own children are blessed with a healthy and supportive home, but I look at the children in the Heart Gallery and I wish that I could take every one of them."

Santos has been a Heart Gallery board member since the group's inception and this year is co-chairing the gallery's fundraiser. The June 7 event will feature portraits of the children taken by local photographers who have contributed their talents so that attendees can see who these

children really are. Representatives of adoption agencies, parents of past gallery subjects, photographers and many of the children featured in the photographs will be on hand. The exhibit will travel to other venues following the fundraiser, drawing attention to the plight of these children and introducing them to a community that, gallery volunteers hope, will include their future families.

The Carpitchers saw their son Lee in a Heart Gallery photograph

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in 2005. “I saw that little boy, and I instantly fell in love,” says Joann Carpitcher. “It was all about the picture; it captured the soul of this little person.” Although they were already the adoptive parents of four children, Joann and her husband Paul went through the process to become foster parents, and two years later Lee became a permanent member of their family.

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At the adoption party, a fundraiser for the Heart Gallery, Lee’s photographer was in attendance. “It meant so much to the photographer,

knowing that he had made a difference in this life,” Carpitcher says. “When he photographed Lee, he couldn’t get him to smile. Two years later, here he was, smiling, laughing, running around. It was amazing!”

It’s no small feat to coordinate the photography, which can involve as many as 15 photographers and 25 to 30 children, all photographed in outdoor settings. Catalina Haynes, a high school photography teacher who learned about the Heart Gallery while a student at Sac State, schedules the sessions using information provided by the adoption agencies. The participating agencies—Sacramento County, Lilliput Children’s Services and Sierra Adoption Services—identify the children to be featured in the gallery, and Haynes lines up the shots. The photographs often include groups of siblings who come as a package; the gallery has had unusual success placing these multiples. Haynes describes one exhibit at which a couple, upon seeing a portrait of three siblings, simply said, “We want them all.”

“Everyone gets good shots because they care so much about it,” says Haynes. “This is not your standard studio photograph; there’s so much at stake.” She tells of one child who came up to her after a photography session and asked, “Are we going to get our parents now?”

“These children in foster care, in my opinion, are the most vulnerable and innocent group in society,” says Santos. “They become part of a cycle that is just heartbreaking. They ‘age out’ and end up on the fringes of society.”

Says Seeback: “The Heart Gallery is a warm, inviting way to introduce these children to the community and, at the same time, to raise awareness that adoption is not age-restricted. Children need parents at every age.”

The Heart Gallery’s fundraiser, Giving Hearts a Home, will be on June 7 from 6 to 9 p.m. at the 20th Street Art Gallery, 911 20th Street. For more information, call 217-1552 or go to sachartgallery.org. ●